WAXEN

A TRAVELER'S GUIDE
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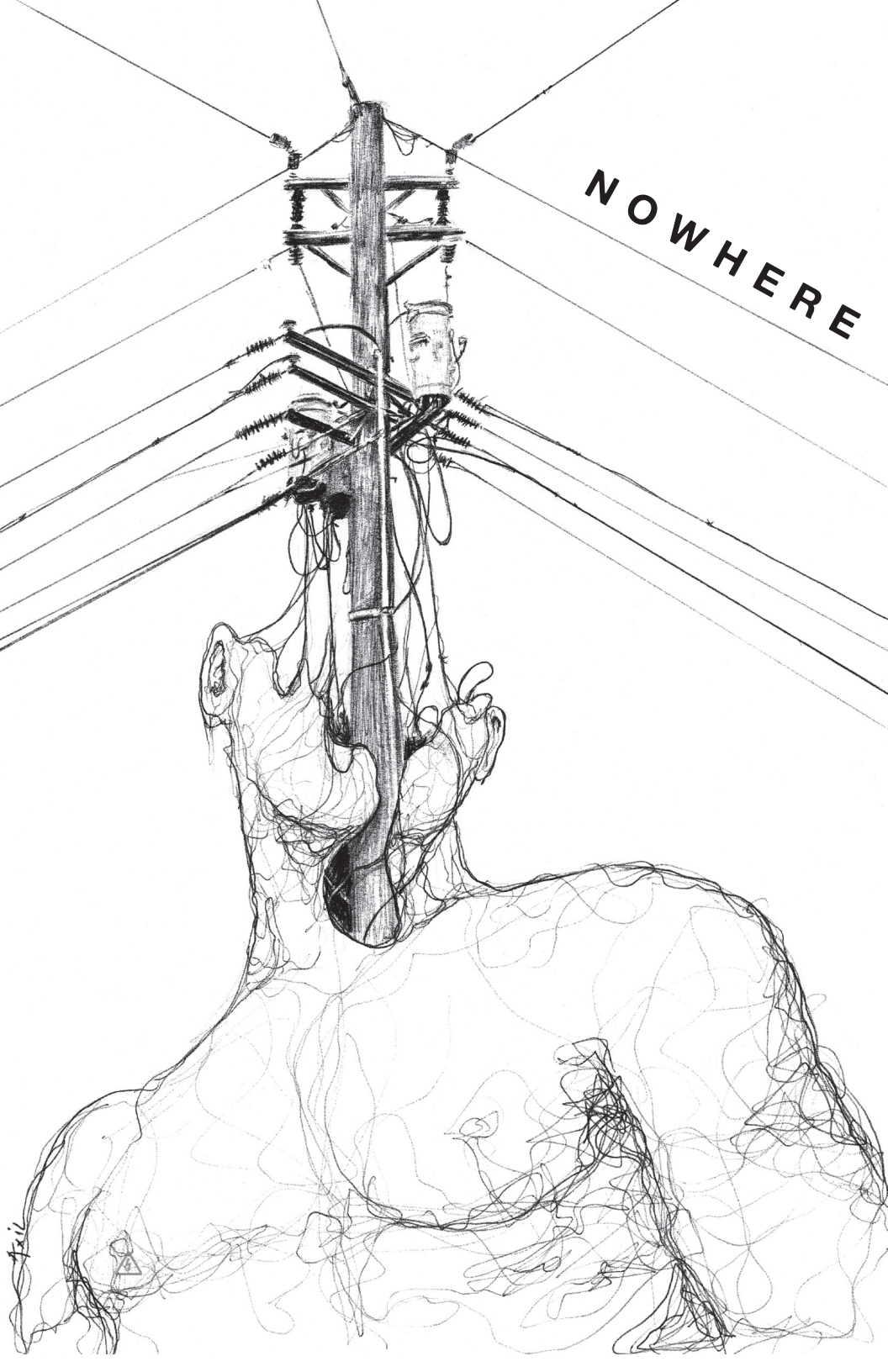

NOWHERE

U S A

They'd been driving in silence for an hour or longer when Sonny, in the passenger seat, turned to Roarke and said, "Ever think that if we just woke up in this car, we wouldn't have any idea where we are?"

"We don't know where we are." Roarke flipped the windshield wipers back on. The rain had stopped a while ago, but now a fine mist clung to the glass.

"What I mean is, the landscape." Sonny waved a hand at the windshield. "Behold."

Outside, the highway was long and flat, the pavement still damp from the recent showers. It was a dewy evening in late spring, and the streetlamps cast uneven pools of yellow light along the asphalt.

Commercial sprawl stretched endlessly on either side. A corporate park with an artificial geyser out front passed on the left. Yet another strip mall rose on the right. Lights glowed in every business and a few cars sat silently in the lots, but the road itself was empty except for Roarke's sedan.

"Here's what I mean," Sonny continued. "Years ago, this was all farmland and wilderness. Then a few towns popped up, and you had some landmarks. Maybe a church, an auto shop, whatever. Joe's Auto Shop. That's *identifiable*. Now it's all just... this."

Roarke rubbed his eyes. "What's your point?" he asked.

"My point is, we could be anywhere," Sonny said. "We could be in Delaware, Ohio... even Utah."

"We're not in Utah."

"But how do you know that? How could you even tell?"

"Have you ever been to Utah?" Roarke asked.

Sonny shook his head.

"There are mountains everywhere in Utah."

"Okay, but there are plenty of flat states. And even states that aren't flat everywhere are flat somewhere. I bet there are some flat places in Utah too," Sonny added.

Roarke had to admit: the man had a point. For hours, all they'd passed were strip malls, office parks, fast-food restaurants, self-storage facilities, and gas stations. He glanced at the GPS, which was still on the fritz. One minute, the tiny screen had shown a topographic map of named roads and highways. The very next, it shifted to a gray, featureless grid, like they'd driven the sedan into an alternate dimension.

It had been like this for hours. Or had it? The clock was stuck at 9:17. They hadn't seen another car on the road since.

"For instance," Sonny continued, "how do you know we're not still in New Jersey?"

"We're not in New Jersey."

"Right. But how do you know?"

"We must've driven five hundred miles already." Roarke couldn't be any more specific. The odometer had stopped working, too. "We'd be in another state by now!"

"But we haven't left the road. And we didn't pass any state borders. So, how can we not still be in New Jersey?"

"That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?"

Sonny shrugged. "I'm just talking to pass the time."

"Don't."

They rolled through the next seven or eight intersections without comment. A few of the traffic lights they passed were red, but Roarke didn't slow down, or care. If the laws of the universe weren't working, why obey the laws of the road?

According to the signs, they were still travelling north on Route 1. Impossible; they should have reached Newark hours ago. Roarke must have driven this highway a thousand times over the years, but nothing on the other side the windshield was recognizable. Or, more accurately, everything they passed *was* recognizable, but none of it was distinct enough to place.

They'd passed Walmarts, Targets, Best Buys, Costcos, Taco Bells, Rite Aids, Jiffy Lubes, Crate & Barrels, Cracker Barrels, Office Depots, Dollar Trees, AutoZones, Petcos, Foot Lockers, Applebee's, Buffalo Wild Wings, a Bad Daddy's Burger Bar, someplace called The Purple Pineapple Pizza Emporium, and an endless procession of gas stations and Dunkins.

At first, they'd pulled off now and then, hoping someone inside might help. But every door they opened led to another abandoned business. Coffee cups left on counters, carts abandoned in aisles, lights still humming over empty rooms. After a while, they stopped trying.

The overhead signs at the intersections were just as useless. Roarke didn't recognize any of the street names. For a while after the GPS stopped working, he'd glanced down the road at each intersection, hoping to find a more promising route. Every street was exactly as sprawling and faceless as the one they were on.

Eventually, he gave up on that, too.

Roarke flipped the radio on. The tuner scanned through static and dead channels until it latched onto a signal, and a voice cut through. A high, keening preacher's wail, the only voice left on the airwaves. The preacher was still bellowing about the repetition of failure and rebellion against the Almighty, all these hours later:

Oh, it circles back again and again, like a wheel turning in the mire!

Roarke flipped the radio off.

A set of Golden Arches loomed on the right. It might've been the hundredth McDonald's they'd passed; Roarke had lost count.

"Mind pulling over?" Sonny asked. "I've gotta take a leak."

Out of habit, Roarke flipped the turn signal on as he pulled into the lot. He eased the sedan into a space not far from the entrance, shifted the car into park, and killed the ignition. The lights were on, but the place looked deserted, like all the others.

"Be right back," Sonny said. He climbed out of the car, stretched his back, and disappeared into the McDonald's.

Roarke lingered behind the wheel, surveying the scene. Floodlamps bathed the McDonald's lot in a sterile glow, stretching long shadows across the pavement. A cloud of gnats spiraled frantically in the light. A few empty cars sat frozen in the drive-through lane.

He considered driving to the Sunoco up ahead while waiting, but the fuel gauge was still at a quarter tank. Would it ever run out? Did it even matter?

With a groan, he stepped out of the car.

The night was still, thick with humidity. The only sounds were the faint hum of the Golden Arches and the crackle of insects hurtling themselves at the lamps.

He pulled out his phone. The screen blinked to life: 9:17,

same as his wristwatch. The signal bars flickered, struggling to connect. No reception. He muttered a curse and pocketed the phone, heading inside.

The scent of stale fast food and disinfectant hit Roarke as he stepped inside. A Sinatra tune drifted from the PA system, tinny and warped, like a transmission from the distant past.

Did McDonald's usually play music? Roarke couldn't remember. Or maybe he'd just never noticed before.

Trays of half-eaten food sat untouched on several of the tables and booths. Burgers, fries, chicken nuggets gone cold. Beverages half-drained, a lipstick stain still fresh on a straw. An ice cream sundae had melted down the side of a plastic cup and congealed into a pool on one table.

"Sonny?" he called out. His voice barely disturbed the stillness.

No response. He stepped toward the counter. Behind it, a worktable held half-assembled Happy Meals, fries roasting beneath the heat lamps. No cashiers or kitchen staff. It was as if the world had been raptured moments before.

As expected, a clock above the registers read 9:17.

Roarke backed away from the cashier's and called down the hallway toward the restrooms, louder this time. "Sonny!"

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, hands clenched at his sides. Finally, a toilet flushed. The bathroom door swung open, and Sonny stepped out, drying his hands on his pants.

"What?" he asked.

Roarke exhaled. "Nothing."

Sonny wandered behind the til and grabbed a Happy Meal and Coke. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked, popping a straw into the beverage.

"No. Let's just get the hell out of here."

"Suit yourself." Sonny slurped as they made their way to the exit.

At the door, Roarke surveyed the joint a final time. A cool shiver ran up his back and out of his body in a brief shudder before he trailed his companion back out into the night.

Roarke slid into the driver's seat and turned the key. The engine rumbled to life, headlights casting ghostly light.

Sonny climbed in beside him, grinning. "Where to now, partner?"

Roarke shot a sidways glare, shook his head, and shifted the car into reverse. He eased it out of the lot and back onto the highway.

They passed the Sunoco station, a U-Store-It facility, and a Hyundai dealership, then yet another strip mall. This one had a Home Depot, a PetSmart, an AT&T Store, a Great Clips, and a GameStop. The same businesses they'd passed before, but in a slightly different order, like a reshuffled deck of cards.

Sonny finished his meal, stuffed the bag at his feet, and licked his fingers clean. Then he pulled a cigarette from his pack with his teeth, flicked open a brushed-nickel Zippo, and lit it. He cracked the window and blew a plume of smoke into the night.

"Maybe we're dead, and this is the afterlife," he said. "Like, uh, purgatory."

Roarke didn't take his eyes off the road. "I don't feel dead. Do you?"

Sonny thought for a second. "No. I guess I don't." He held out his pack of cigarettes. "Maybe we're caught in some kind of time loop."

Roarke shook his head. "A 'loop' means the same thing over and over again," Roarke said. "This is similar, but different. I'm good on the smokes."

Sonny shrugged, withdrew the pack, and ashed his own out the window. "Ever see that Jim Carey movie? The one where he real-

izes his whole life is a TV show?"

"*The Truman Show*?"

"Right, *The Truman Show*." He gestured vaguely. "Maybe this is like that."

Roarke shook his head. "A couple of old guys driving around lost wouldn't make for much of a show."

Sonny stared out the window for a few drags. "Alright. Alright then. I got another theory."

Roarke's grip on the wheel tightened. "I can't wait."

"Maybe it's some kind of psychological experiment." Sonny swept his hands through the air like a magician about to reveal a trick. "Or a government study."

Roarke's knuckles went white. "Yeah? And what exactly are they studying?"

Sonny shrugged. "Dunno. Human endurance? Existential dread?"

"Why would people so powerful conduct such stupid experiments?" Roarke asked.

"Hey, I'm just spit-balling over here."

Roarke turned his eyes back to the road. The yellow halogen lights buzzed overhead, stretching to the horizon.

He flicked the radio on, scanning the dials.

Static hissed. A now-familiar voice cut through the fuzz.

The Warbling Veil is coming, the preacher rasped, low and feverish.

And with it, the world will be reset.

The failed will be cleansed.

All will be undone and made anew.

Do not fear the Veil!

It is the **end** *and the* **beginning**, *the circle turning once more.*

Prepare yourselves...

Roarke flicked the radio off.

For a long while, neither man spoke. They passed strip malls, office parks, gas stations. The only sounds were the purr of the sedan's engine and the tires rolling over damp pavement.

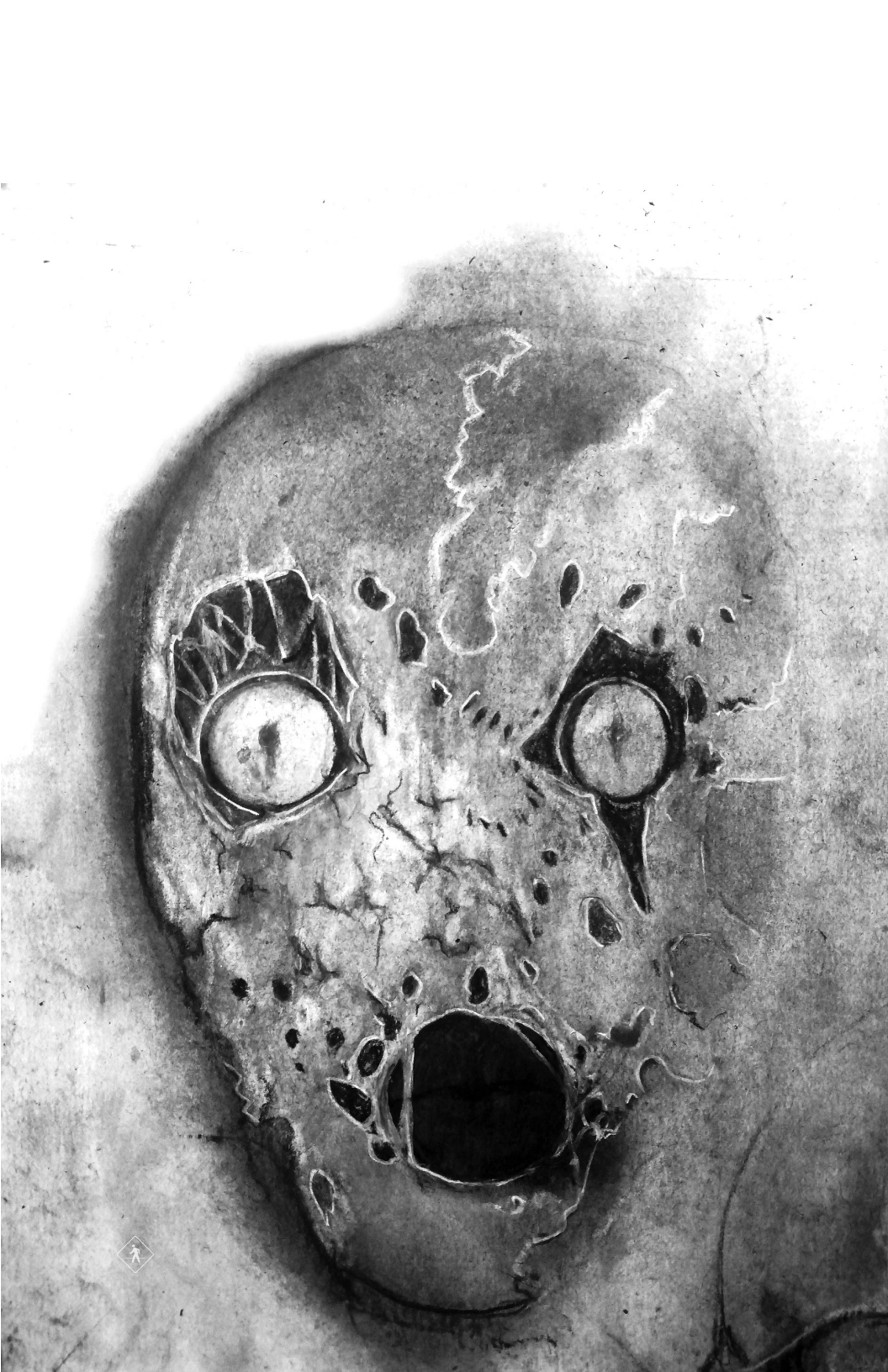
Sonny cleared his throat. "Want me to take over driving for a while?"

"No, I'm good," Roarke replied. "Thanks."

Sonny shrugged and settled deeper into his seat. "In that case, I'm gonna take a nap." He pulled his hat low over his eyes. "Just wake me if you get tired, or, uh, if something different happens, okay?"

Roarke didn't respond. He just kept driving, listening to the hum of the tires, waiting. For what, he didn't know. Something new was coming, just over the horizon.

It had to be.



HITCHHIKER ETIQUETTE

Do not stop for hitchhikers.

Carly barely noticed the sign; the setting sun lit her entire front car window on fire and made it exceedingly difficult to see the lines of the road. The sign, in its own vendetta, reflected even more glare back at her, and she angrily adjusted her visor, trying to block out the sinking light.

Still, the words were bold enough to sink into her brain. She looked around, wondering why the sign was telling her not to pick up anyone. But there was only prairie—low grass and dirt for the miles and miles she could see from the road. Everything was flat and empty.

The phone abandoned on the passenger seat began to vibrate. Angry buzzing shook it from her grip several times before she finally caught the damn thing and brought it up to her ear.

"Hello?"

Do not stop for hitchhikers.

Another one of those signs, easier to read now that the road shifted enough for the sun to be out of her eyes.

"Where are you?" Her son's scorn was sharp and clear over the phone, even all these miles away. The wonders of technology. Carly looked out the window at the ankle-high wheat waving in the dry, Midwest breeze.

"Somewhere in Indiana, maybe. Or Ohio." She never was good at determining the state from its outline on the highway markers.

"You're really doing this, then?" Jerome always was her most hotheaded, and though her annoyance flared at his attitude, she still felt a pride that he cared so much.

"Don't take that tone with me," she said, even though there wasn't any force behind the reprimand. The others claimed that she favored her oldest, but that wasn't entirely true.

"Ma, I swear to God. You better be here."

Carly shook her head, as if he'd be able to see it. "Your cousin Nina just had a baby. You knew I was planning to go down to visit."

"The baby can wait, Ma."

Wait, wait, wait, Mom. Just wait.

Anger buried sharp claws into the space between her collar bones. She shoved it down with the memories of that voice. Jerome didn't understand; none of them did. Not really.

Do not pick up hitchhikers.

Carly's irritation shifted toward the signs. She had gotten the gist after the first one. The road curved around a small grove of trees and opened back into the low prairie.

Except now a section of the grass, not too far back from the road, bowed under the heavy roof of a wooden bus shelter. A single lightbulb—one of the old incandescent ones that housed dirt and insect legs—flickered underneath its ceiling. In the late afternoon, the light cast by the low sun made it hard to see into the shadows of the shelter.

Carly thought maybe she could make out an old chair - a rocker?

That didn't make sense. Although, she supposed having a bus stop along a road where there was nothing for miles didn't make any more sense.

Jerome's pleas filtered down the phone line. "Just come, Ma. Luckily, it's not for another two days. You've still got time to make it."

Do not pick up hitchhikers.

There was a sign right by the shelter, big bold letters scolding her as much as Jermone was. He knew her better than to assume that she'd bow to his demands.

She refused to answer him, mouth pressed into a thin line. Eventually, he stopped trying to talk to her. A moment later, that annoying background whine of a spotty connected cut off. He'd hung up, but she wouldn't hold that against him. He at least knew when to give up on a useless argument.

One more sign loomed up, wedged against the border of the road and the plains. It seemed someone had graffitied this one with bright, ugly neon spray paint, but Carly couldn't imagine who would be out here, tagging signs in the middle of nowhere.

Do not pick up hitchhikers.

In the rearview mirror, the shelter light blinked on and off, illuminating the edge of the chair in the middle of the shadows.

Layla called an hour later, when the sun was hugging the skyline over the fields. The horizon went on forever, as flat as everything around her.

Carly noticed her youngest's name pop up on the cell, which was now balanced in the cupholder so she could see the screen. She'd been waiting for Jerome to call back and apologize, but it seemed her children were still trying to convince her. She thought she'd taught them better, but she couldn't stay upset at Jermone for long. She'd raised him to be strong, assertive. A leader.

A brief moment after she let the call go answered, the phone began to vibrate again. Carly rolled her eyes towards the clear sky and finally picked up.

"Mum, what are you doing?"

Layla didn't spare any pleasantries. She talked fast and rarely stopped—a trait she had ever since she was an infant, babbling even in sleep as Carly rocked her.

Carly sighed, missing the ghost of a young body cradled in her arms. "I already told Jerome—I'm visiting Nina and the baby. This has been planned for weeks."

"You've got to be kidding!"

You've got to be kidding. Can't you give me a second to explain?

Carly shook her head, clearing the spiderwebs of that voice from fogging her brain further. When she looked up, there was another shelter by the road in front of her.

This far out, it was a small thing, right on the edge of the world, but she still should have been able to see it before she'd momentarily shut her eyes.

"Mum!"

"What?"

"Are you listening to me?"

As much as she was listening to the voice in her head, she supposed. The shelter unsettled her for reasons she couldn't pinpoint, as if she felt the rot of the wood in her own bones. Her daughter was raising her voice, always resorting to volume when she didn't think people were listening to her.

"Yes, Layla. And stop yelling at me." She ignored the way her own voice rose.

"I'm not yelling, Mum. You're not letting me explain!"

Give me a second to explain. Just a second.

"I'm not turning around."

A stifled sob echoes across the airwaves. "Mum, please."

Please, please, please listen.

"I'm going to see the baby, Layla. I'm not turning around."

Please, please, please.

She wished her memory would kill that voice already.

Another sob and then nothing.

Her car reached the shelter too fast, and without anyone to distract her, she couldn't help but turn to stare at it as she passed. If she hadn't known better—if the mile markers surrounding the shelter hadn't told her there was a hundred miles between this one and the last one she'd seen with the sign—she'd swear this shelter had the same lightbulb, the same abandoned chair.

Definitely a rocking chair; she could clearly see it this time, the shadows had shifted to reveal it all alone in the middle of the concrete floor. She pushed her foot against the gas pedal, urged the car to go faster and leave behind the unsettling shelter and that voice that kept following her.

Owen called last, ever her middle child—unwilling to start any trouble, always trying to please.

"You made Layla cry, Ma."

Hot, messy tears on a face blurred in memories. Carly did at least remember the ugliness of misplaced grief. "I did no such thing," she told Owen.

The sun had abandoned her on a road that seemed to stretch on forever. The road signs told her she was progressing, though, and she used the fading grays of dusk to watch for the mile markers every time they cropped up.

"Ma, everyone else will be here."

"Nina and the baby won't," she said with a proud sort of vindictiveness.

Someone shouted in the background, and she heard the scratch as Owen covered the phone with his hand. She could picture that palm, large but gentle. Even though they'd again and again tried her patience, she still loved what her children had grown into.

If only they'd respect her as much as she respected them.

She heard Owen's muffled voice talking to another. Maybe Jerome's, based on the angry baritone thrum slipping through the gaps in Owen's fingers.

"Calm down," she heard Owen say, trying to keep the peace, and then his voice was clear again through the phone. "Ma, isn't it time to let it go?"

As if he knew anything about forgiving and forgetting.

Carly didn't say that aloud, though, because she loved him, even when he didn't act appreciative. Instead, she took her frustration out on the steering wheel. Fingers clenched bloodless against the faux leather, she breathed out, closed her eyes briefly on the empty, straight road, and reminded herself that her children just didn't get it.

"Ma, why can't you just pretend to care for a second?"

Don't you care? About me?

She felt the potholes catch against her tires and wondered if she was in danger of running off the road. Still, she refused to open her eyes. If she ran into one of the sad, sparse trees that grew on these plains, then it was Owen's fault.

"Ma, didn't you love 'em?"

Don't you love me?

Those words burned something hot and terrible through her, and the wheel wobbled in her hand. The car began to swerve, and her eyes snapped open.

Do not pick up hitchhikers.

The sign was too close, screaming at her right in front of another one of those decaying shelters—right in the middle of her front windshield. Carly pushed the brake down to the floor, and the car skidded to a stop, but not before her hood hit the sign, bending the pole and angling the words to face her head-on.

DO NOT PICK UP HITCHHIKERS.

"I know!" she shouted. The sign stood unmoving. Unimpressed.

"Ma? Ma are you okay? Ma!"

"I'm fine, Owen." She didn't mean to snap at him, but the hood was dented and adrenaline shook through her, threatening to vibrate her to pieces. She hung up without apologizing, cutting him off mid-word.

Hesitantly, Carly pulled the gear shift back into reverse, and the car groaned as it pulled itself from the sign. When the sign held without the hood bracing it, she breathed out and straightened back onto the road. She looked back towards the sign, bent over as if in prayer. In the shelter behind it, the lightbulb flickered, drawing her eyes to another rocker. Its curved feet pitched back and forth on the dirty cement.

An arm stuck out from the shadows of the chair, right behind the cowed sign. Wrinkled skin sagged down from the limb, pouring like liquid. The arm seemed frail against all that excess skin, creased more than Carly thought possible, but it held ramrod straight. At the end of that arm, visible even in the encroaching darkness, a thumbs up.

A strong wind blew across the road, pushing against the car frame and whipping the prairie grasses back and forth. It shook the sign, and Carly caught glimpses of words even as the thumb remained immobile.

Do not—

She floored the gas.

Thirty minutes out from the last shelter. Owen called back. The world around Carly was dark, illuminated in a cone by her high beams, but she'd finally been able to calm herself down after she'd stopped seeing movement in the shadows of her headlights.

"Ma?" Breath-y and pitched higher than usual, his voice trembled across the miles to constrict around her heart. "Are you okay?" She hadn't meant to worry him.

"I'm fine, Owen. Just hit a branch in the road—the car's fine." She wouldn't tell him about the sign. He'd no doubt tell Jerome, who'd call the police if he found out she'd swerved.

"God, you scared me and Layla, Ma."

"I'm not going to apologize. All of you continuously calling are making driving dangerous, especially in the dark."

There was a pause, and Carly could picture Owen's sharp mind turning, trying to find a way to convince her.

"You've been driving all day, and I'm worried about you getting in an accident," he said. She thought about her collision with the sign, refusing to consider how much worse it could have been. "If you're not going to turn around, at least stop at a hotel for the night."

Where am I supposed to go? That voice, persistent as ever. God, did she hate it.

A friend's. A hotel. I don't care, she'd said. *It just isn't going to be here. Not for one more night.*

But—

No. This is the last conversation we're having. Get out.

Get out, she repeated to that voice. *Get out, get out, get out!*

"Ma, promise me you'll sleep." Like a tether, Owen kept her from plummeting into an abyss of uncomfortable memories. She grew aware of the numbness in her legs from sitting too long, the ache in her elbows from their position cramped against the armrest.

Carly gripped the wheel tightly, picturing herself bludgeoning the voice with the sign that had dented her car, over and over again until it finally sat quiet. She removed herself from the memory.

Up ahead, a light flickered to life on the side of the road. Carly felt unease pool at the back of her mouth. It tasted acidic, bitter, like bile.

"I'll stop when I'm ready," she told Owen. "Goodbye."

Owen paused, and the silence stretched out as long as the

road in front of her. The light grew brighter as the car drew closer; she couldn't help but slow down as the shelter came into view.

"Goodbye, Ma." Another halt. "Love you."

Don't you love me?

Get out.

This lightbulb shined brighter, flickering like the others, and illuminated the body present in the rocking chair fully up to the neck. Carly slowed her car to a crawl to look, but didn't dare stop.

The skin bulged and spilled over from the neck and arm openings of a dull gray dress. Like the arm she'd seen before, there was too much of it.

I have nowhere to go.

Get out!

Carly barely noticed the argument replaying again in her head. Too much - there was too much there flesh for one person. It folded over itself, seemingly tangled and bunched up into knots. The arm extended out from the sea of tissue held itself up tall and straight, though, and when she rolled in front of the shelter, its hand stuck up a thumb.

She swung her head back to the front, straight on so that whoever was waiting in the shelter would think she hadn't seen them. They had seen her, though—there was no doubting that.

The thumb glowed in the artificial light, all while the skin underneath it twirled and rippled like a nest of snakes.

Get out, she pleaded as she drove past, increasing her speed, but she wasn't sure if she was begging to the voice in her head or the thing rocking in the shelter.

"Mum."

One word from her baby that usually had many. Carly ignored the temors in her hand as it pressed the phone against her ear and checked the mile markers for the tenth time that hour. She

must be getting closer to something resembling civilization soon, right?

Still, the prairie had that way about it, like it might open up wide enough to swallow up the whole world.

"Yes, Layla?" Her voice sounded tired, and she was sure Layla heard the exhaustion. It was too late to swallow words now. Maybe Owen was right. Maybe she should find a hotel for the night.

"Are you really not coming?" She sounded small, lost, and for a brief moment, Carly felt guilty for making Layla feel that way. She reminded herself that she had nothing to feel guilty for. Despite that, an unfamiliar hollowness formed in her gut.

"No, Layla. I'm not coming."

"For God's sake, Mum, they're your children!"

That hollow feeling took the shape of a black hole, a single point of gravity that left nothing inside her but the cold, shapeless void around it.

I'm your child! Why won't you talk to me?

Not anymore, you aren't.

Mom….

Don't call me that.

"I only have three kids, Layla. You know that." Her tone was as flat as the prarie, leaving no room for any dispute.

Another yellow glow in the fields—another shelter. Carly found herself unsure of what she dreaded more—the bus shelter or the conversation she was having currently.

"You know what, Mum? Fine. Go see Nina and her fucking baby. See if we care."

"Language, Layla."

"Oh, fuck off!"

Layla hung up before Carly could say anything further. Her anger overrode her growing fear of the approaching shelter. Her daughter had no right to talk to her like that; as if she could even understand Carly's decision. As if Carly was anything but right.

When she was close enough to see the planks of the small

hut, she saw the damn rocking chair again and its grotesque occupant. Even more skin spilled over its arms, pouring down the rungs of the back, getting caught and twisted under the legs. With every movement forwards, the rockers snagged on the loose flesh, tearing them on the way back up. The wood gashed deep trenches into the skin, and still the motion continued, as if who or whatever sat in the chair felt nothing. As if there was too much flesh for one body to feel, to even know it was there.

She still couldn't see their face.

Everything from the neck up hid under in thick shadows. And *that neck*—too thin and bony to even apear part of the same body. Carly wasn't sure how it didn't sink into the mass of tissue that bubbled out of the frilled dress's collar.

The chair stopped rocking. An arm lifted up and out, thumb raised.

Carly hadn't realized she was stopped in the middle of the road, close enough to the shelter that only a step or two separated her passenger's side door from the dirty concrete at the base of the structure.

When had she pushed on the brake?

When had the shelters moved closer to the road?

The chair stood still and statuesque, and though she couldn't see any face, Carly knew whoever sat there was watching. The thumb lifted higher; it looked like the stem of a rotten peach, spilling out over decaying fruit. All sagging skin—no insides left.

The bulb above the shelter flared brighter, the high-pitched whine of the struggling fluorescence audible in the car's cabin. For a moment, Carly thought it would glow bright enough for her to make out the face. She didn't know if even she wanted to see it.

She slammed on the gas pedal and the car lurched forward with a nauseating force, so quick that her skull bounced off of the headrest. She got far away fast enough—in the rearview, she still couldn't see the head hidden in the shadows, just the motion of the rocking as it resumed, and that hand, stuck out rigid, thumb still up.

The night pressed down tightly around the car, and the road stretched out endlessly on the flat land in front of her headlights.

A swell of loneliness choked her; she suddenly wanted Layla to call back. She missed her children. She missed civilization. Carly didn't know what was happening, if what she was seeing was even real, and she needed someone's voice to anchor her. She needed to grip someone's hand in hers, feel their skin on her palm.

Skin bubbling up from a tattered dress. Skin frothing over, never-ending, consuming the chair and the bus shelter and everything around it.

Her phone went off, startling Carly so badly that the car swerved briefly before she corrected its path.

"Hello?" she spoke, her voice wavering before she swallowed back her fear.

"Ma, I'm done arguing. You better...are you okay?" The heat behind Jerome's words died as quickly as it had sparked.

"I'm fine." The statement might not have been as convincing as intended.

"Ma...." Jerome began to breathe slowly, attempting to regulate his inherited temper. "Are you okay?" he repeated.

"I'm fine." If she put enough emphasis behind the words, then maybe she'd start to believe them.

"Ma," he said again. Apparently, she hadn't been convincing enough.

"Just tired."

The tires skipped out an uneven beat on the bumpy pavement, emphasizing the silence between them.

"It's not too late, Ma." He cleared his throat. And who was this man on the phone with her, trying to calm his anger? Trying to reason with her?

"I've said it a thousand times, Jerome. I'm not turning

around."

"For God's sake, Ma, it's their funeral!"

His shout left a reverberation in the car. Tears burned in her sinuses, but she didn't know why she felt like crying at all. Perhaps she was just more tired and angry than she'd realized. Her headlights caught the boney flank of a coyote disappearing in the brush, and she let her thoughts wander to what wildlife hid among the shrubbery around her. It was an easier line of reflection.

"It's not too late to make things right."

Jerome's voice had fallen into a hushed reverence, as if in death, all things could be forgiven.

"I haven't done anything wrong that I have to make right," she argued. "Except, it seems, raising respectful children."

She wondered if he'd argue again. She wanted it, wanted them to fight and scream, wanted the rage to burn away this odd mix of uncertainty and whatever alien feeling burrowed a deep hole in her gut.

"So that's how it's going to end, huh?" Jerome phrased it like a question, but he seemed to know the answer, even before he asked. "I'll call you after. Maybe." He waited.

"Goodbye," she said.

A sigh. He was disappointed in her, but she would let it slide. He just didn't understand.

"Goodbye, Ma."

Goodbye, Mom.

Don't call me that.

...just goodbye, then.

Gently, she placed the phone in the cupholder, a small pat with her fingers assuring her it was secure. She wanted to call Jerome back, if only to get rid of the remnants of that voice. It swirled around the chilled air of the cabin and reverberated across the empty prairie. She couldn't, though. To call him back would be to admit that somehow—however small—he had been right. But she hadn't

been wrong.

Carly blinked, and another shelter was in front of her, caught along the edges of her headlights. The light overhead was dark, and the structure's sudden appearance, melting out of the night, caught her by surprise. The concrete floor was starting to encroach upon the road, and she had to veer into the opposite lane to keep from catching it with her front tire. She didn't slow down as she drove by, not this time, but did turn her head to look. The naked lightbulb flared to life as she passed.

It burned hot and violent and lit up the deepest corners of the wooden shack. Although it felt she was pushing seventy miles per hour, it seemed to take forever to pass by the small shelter, long enough for her gaze to scale the mountainous folds of the rocker's skin like an alpinist. Up past knees that melted into thighs, up past that formless chest, where the flesh crawled and pulsated under the dull dress like earthworms burying through dirt, up that thin, frail neck (off of which the skin seemed to drip like candle wax), up to the face, now framed in a fl.

There were no features on that face. No eyes or mouth. A flat expanse of tissue where the nose should be.

Still, the figure knew she was looking, and when her eyes met the smooth skin where the eyes should be, its hand raised. As she sped past, the thumb stuck out.

Panting, Carly locked her eyes straight on the road ahead. She needed to get off, to go, anywhere but here. How long until there was an exit? She tried to find the mile markers, tried to remember the last time she'd been aware of one. She did not think about the thing in the bus shelter, face featureless, except for the high cheekbones she prided herself on.

None of her children had inherited her cheekbones.

One had. Only one.

No one had.

Layla wasn't answering her phone, and Owen's appeared to be off. When Carly dialed Jerome, he sent her to voicemail after only two rings.

She wanted to be enraged; she wanted to feel anything but the hot fear which spiked her heart rate at unexpected times and sent a tight numbness to her fingers and toes. Another copse of trees swarmed past her, and though their height would have been laughed at back home, they seemed to tower above her. They surrounded the road, and she hunched her shoulders against their silent judgement. When the small cluster of basswoods opened up around her, she found herself in front of a river and a small grated bridge. Carly slowed her car.

A bus shelter sat in the middle of the bridge, not leaving enough room on either side for her to get around (it unless she wanted to drive into the river). Even in the dark, her headlights flooded the muddy water, the rapids swirling like a shadow play under her beams.

One last hitchhiker sign—most of it missing, chewed apart by rust and wind—stuck straight up from the supports of the bridge. Only two words remained to speak to her.

pick up

Fumbling with her cell, she kept her eyes glued to the shelter. She tried calling Jerome again. *Pick up*, she begged.

Pick up, Mom. Please. I miss you, and I don't know if you'll ever get this but please pick up and talk to me.

Jerome didn't answer. Neither did Layla. Or Owen.

The phone fell to the passenger's seat. It bounced off the cushion and then tumbled to the floor. Carly made no effort to retrieve it.

Looking over her shoulder at the road behind her, she weighed her options. She thought of the long, long stretch of pave-

ment behind her, of all those other shelters sitting quietly along the stretch, waiting for her to return. Had they crept onto the road as well?

The overhead bulb ignited with bright light and seemed to set the wooden frame on fire. The figure sat in the center, rocking in practiced rhythm, staring from behind that blank face. The skin was a small ocean now, covering the concrete in a writhing mass of pores and fine hair.

She could still turn around, risk the prairie dirt under her tires to get around the other shelters, and drive all the way back to her hometown and the judgement laid in waiting there.

The figure lifted its arm.

Maybe she could go fast enough to ram the frail wood and plow her way through. Without much thought, she pushed the gas pedal down and watched the needle on the speedometer sputter as it climbed.

Thumb raised.

But what if she stopped?

The thought invaded her mind, as unwelcome as the ghost of the voice that had been haunting her mind. Yet she couldn't let the idea go; if she stopped listening to the signs and her children, what was the worst that could happen?

Thick skin flowing over her, suffocating her. Covering her eyes and her nose, and her mouth. She shook her head, breath stuttering. Carly wasn't sure where that thought had come from.

The phone on her floor rang, and she looked down to see a number she hadn't thought about in many, many years. She was surprised she still recognized it, staring up unanswered time after time.

Pick up.

The car's speed faltered, dropped.

She knew, she *knew* nothing good would happen if she let this thing in. But she supposed the other had been riding with her

longer than she'd realized, and it was too late to change that.

It was better, she supposed, than turning around, going back to her children and their judgments. Back to that memory of a voice she would never again hear, a coffin she would never look in, and a grave she would never visit.

The hitchhiker sat in the rocker in the middle of the empty bridge. Arm raised, thumb out. Carly eased on the brake pedal until the car stood just shy of the bridge, pulled over alongside the shelter, and let the hitchhiker in.

POISON IT, BURN IT, CUT IT OUT

You have let yourself be poisoned, chemicals corroding you to eject an unwanted illness, a rotting collection of cells in your lymph nodes. You are told the brain fog is normal, that in time it might go away, but you can't help but wonder if you will never be the same. How can someone who allows poison into their body ever recover from it? Which is worse, the cancer or the chemo? You don't deserve this. There are millions of people out there who this should have happened to instead.

Your skin is oily like Lakeshore drive after the first summer rain when caked layers of pungent car exhaust aerosolize and cling to your lungs like mold spores. That beautiful vein of the city that runs along the lake, contained between the vastness of open water and the compression of the buildings that has become an attraction for parasitic tourists who want their social media selfie. Good for the economy, you've been told again and again, but their numbers grow and grow, and what about the rest of you that live here?

You taste unwashed excretions with every breath, but you cannot tell if that is a chemical response or a fevered one. You ask for water but are told that it rained recently so the river is full of feces. You ask for ice and are told Lake Michigan hasn't frozen in years because the world has a fever, but no one is paying attention to it. The fever burns hotter every year but they just tell you the healthy temperature of a body is higher than you previously thought.

You ask for Coca Cola and it arrives in a lukewarm glass. It is flat and you wanted bubbles, but it took so long to get liquid into your parched throat that you drink it anyway. You only take one sip though before suddenly you are aware of how full of water you are. So many chemicals in your body, all infused with your water to bloat your blood. You have to flush twice, your pee is so acidic. You wonder if it is so acidic it will burn you at some point, the way rivers catch fire. People still talk about the Cuyahoga river catching fire over fifty years ago; people forget that the Chicago river did too because when they think of Chicago and fire, they think of a fictitious scapegoated cow and three square miles of charred wreckage—a city that needed to be rebuilt from ash.

If you drink more, you will burst, you will pop like a cyst and ooze your poison and acid all over the house, corroding its steel, rotting its wood, haunting it with the ghost of a disease that will never be gone. The nurse will have to clean up after you.

There are ice packs on your feet to keep you from losing sensation there but no one warned you about your tongue, which melts like burning candle wax every time you swallow, losing all intended structure with use.You ask the nurse that you paid to give you home care because you don't have children or a husband or parents still living to tend you, but at least you have money, "Is this normal? Will I lose my sense of taste forever?"

She looks at you, brows stitching together in concern. She's polite and quiet, and has had the professionalism to straighten her natural hair. "It's not likely. The doctor would have warned you if that was possible." She's young, though, and if there's one thing you've learned from the young it's that they don't know as much as they think they know.

"Are you sure?" you whine like a child. You wish you were a child. People care more when a child has cancer, suffering and beloved by heartbroken parents, martyred by the unfairness of the universe. No one cares about a middle-aged childless woman

poisoning her body to stay alive, even though the poison will take years off her life in the end anyway. It's not Botox to keep her young and beautiful, after all. When did people stop caring about cancer? Wasn't there supposed to be a cure for cancer by now? Have people stopped caring about the dying—even children?

Maybe people don't care about dying children unless they are the child's parents, like the kids shot in schools—no one cares about them even though you're sure it happens all the time. You know guns are a problem in Chicago. Everyone says so, even though you've never seen a gun, ensconced as you are in the nice home your grandparents bought when the Home Owner's Loan Corporation pushed the wrong sorts of people into other parts of the city. You wonder if it was the cancer or the chemo, the city's blood or a toxin to drive out parasites. Guns kill the wrong kind of children, and you're the wrong kind of cancer victim.

"Has anyone come to visit?" you ask the nurse.

"No," she replies without looking at you.

"Not even my children?" you ask next.

"No ma'am." The way she says it sounds disconcerted, though.

You blink. You have children, don't you?

But you don't. You know that.

That's the cancer brain, chemicals breaking the reliable parts of you, like a city undergoing an earthquake, bones as buildings crumbling where they stand. You stare at the nurse with eyes that seem incapable of properly focusing, trying to think the way the city did when it was hale and healthy, before cancers grew in its neighborhoods and burning poison tore through its veins.

How much must the city have crumbled under the weight of the cancer drugs for the nurse to become a bear?

You blink again, trying to clear your vision.

Has she always been a bear? This city has always had an obsession with bears. The Cub Cub Cubbies up in Wrigleyville, Da

Bears at Soldier Field. You've never seen a bear in your life outside of the Lincoln Park Zoo, but Chicago long ago claimed the bear as an emblem, as an avatar. The nurse is a bear because she has always been a bear.

The bear purrs like a cat, widens its mouth in a surreal smile that reminds you of that Japanese movie with the cat bus where the little girl hallucinates a giant raccoon-cat best friend because her mother is dying of cancer. The bear in front of you looks more like a teddy bear than a wild creature, so maybe it is the cat bus. Maybe it will take you to your children.

"Is everything all right," the nurse bear bus asks.

"Just fine," you mumble, as though your teeth aren't melting like your tongue in your mouth.

You don't like the CTA. You have a car that gets you through the city faster, a big SUV that would keep you alive if you got flipped over in it, more reliable than the well-invested Blue Line, shuttling tourists like fresh blood into the heart of the city, more comfortable than the toxin-filled Red Line that draws people out of the heart of the city, but always smells like beer or vomit or Cubs fans. In and out, in and out, a beating heart.

You avoid these veins and their heart with its Bean and its park and its museums. You do not want to remember it exists beyond you, full of people you didn't ask to be there, even if bleeding veins put you where you are now. But this bus looks at you like you're a friend. You need a friend. You don't have any friends who would come and sit with you while you poison yourself to stay alive. Denise is in Cabo—she likes to find the sun in winter—and Monica had to go take care of her new grandchild, so you had to hire a nurse bear bus to care about you.

"Where do you want to go?" the bus asks with a grin.

"But grandmother, what sharp teeth you have." Your voice is raspy, your throat too dry despite the flat Coca Cola.

The grin widens; the teeth sharpen.

You want your life back. The life you had before the cancer, when everything was easy. Not necessarily nice—you'll never forgive Marsha Poulos for stealing Gregory Wozniak from you in high school. You're pretty sure he would have married you and then you wouldn't be alone, clattering around your house like a ghost who's still alive. But things weren't hard, at least. You could move around without feeling like every part of your body was failing, you could piss without poisoning the sewer system, you didn't have to fear that the poison wouldn't work like the surgery hadn't worked and that the radiation won't work either. Will they have to burn the whole broken city to the ground to rebuild all the way to Lincoln Park?

"Pilsen," you tell the bus. That house in Pilsen is the last rental property you haven't sold to a developer yet. Developers buzz around you like flies and you're already a corpse; at least they're trying to buy it off you, and not just pillage you while your chemical-corroded being collapses inside you. But even if you're a wasteland, they'll only get that deed from your cold dead fingers. You're fairly certain that if you can get the Gonzalezes out, you can do a quick fix up and rent it at three times the price to some tech millennial who think Pilsen is so cool, the way they thought Logan Square was so cool. You won't make the same mistakes you made in Logan. You're not selling to a property company unless you stop pulling a profit. You just need to evict the Gonzalezes. They are here legally, you have seen the green cards with your own eyes, but it shouldn't be too hard. They don't pay their rent on time. They say that it's because they have to make payments to their medical payment plan, but that won't work as an excuse on you now. If it weren't for you—for your cancer—you would have evicted them, freed the closest thing you have to a child from the parasite clump that doesn't treat her well.

"Pilsen," the bus growls. "Come aboard, then."

You get up, and stumble towards the bus that is also a bear and your nurse and a third thing you didn't realize.

I was never meant to be a city.

I was a trading post, a collection of houses along a marsh that was good for growing garlic. But centers of commerce at the mouths of rivers always become cities in the end. They expand around the life within them until they become something quite new, predictable yet unpredicted. Their rivers clog with the crud of industry they didn't ask for, trees fall to make room for houses and towers of stone.

I grew in ways I didn't expect, as the young always do, despite thinking they know, they understand, everything. I became a living thing, a breathing thing.

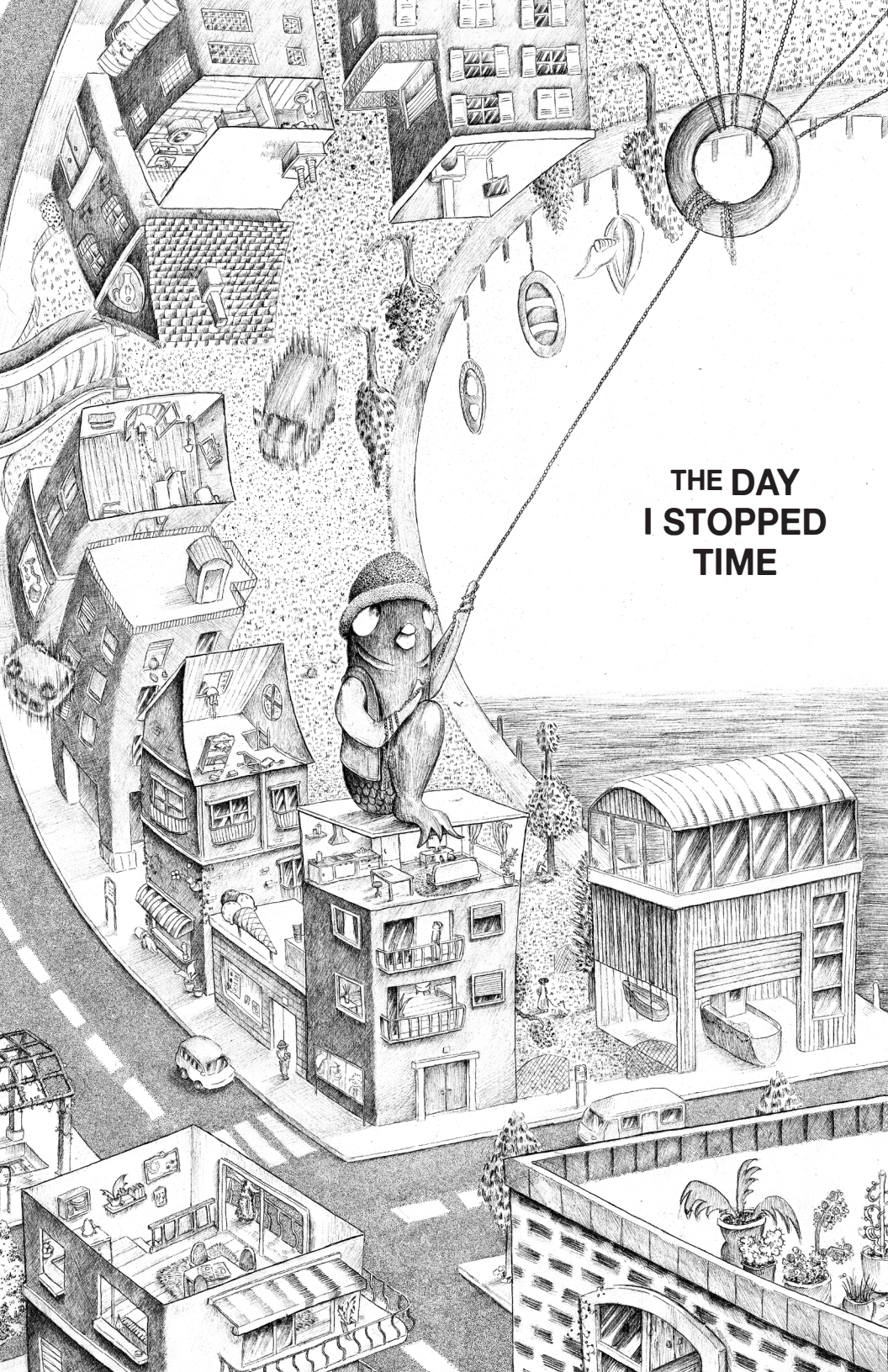
Saint Louis jokes that cities export their Midwestern Nice to become their own special brand of Midwestern brutal; Detroit agrees; no one's heard from Cleveland in years. But though I am harsh, I am not all they say I am—violent and poor, cold and boring. So many diagnoses from a prescriber who has never set foot on the diagonal thoroughfares crossing the grids they predate. So many attempts to fix the symptoms—apply ice as needed!—that are little more than misdirections. Mirages.

But I know what is wrong with me, where others only hypothesize. How precisely I poisoned my blood, I burned my heart, tried to cut out the parts of me that made me worse, which in itself only made me worse.

And so did you, a clump of cells grown parasitic in the system. Time to cut you out too.

Yes, I'll take you to Pilsen if you'd like. I'll leave you there too.

Maybe then you'll be gone, and I'll be in remission until **there's a new parasite to burn through.**


THE DAY
I STOPPED
TIME

FRIDAY. SUNSET.

I stopped time.

Just now.

Right here.

Just now being relative. At this point, I've been in the **now** for a few hours. Sat here, observing everything. Studying *her*. The eerie silence is taking some getting used to, even moreso than the quiet rendered by the pandemic. We at least had birdsongs back then, a reminder of some forms of life going on unbothered. But this is something else.

And my tinnitus...that's gone too. At least I know my suspicion was correct, it was just another side effect of containing this for so long. The difference is staggering. If it wasn't for the sound of my congested nose catching on every breath, I could swear I'd straight up lost my hearing. But there's nothing wrong with that sense – hell, if I listen hard enough, like *really* listen, I can just about hear my heart beating. Still rapid. Pulsing as hard as in the moment before I...

Anyway, one thing I *could* get used to is the view. Still as mind-blowing as when we stepped out here, hours ago in my time but thirty-two minutes ago in hers. My watch stopped at the precise moment - a few second past 7:02pm. The reservation was for 6:30, timed for the sunset. Timed for magic hour, the moment that I had chosen. But now, like everything else, it's just stuck there; an eternal gloaming, forever bathing the Giudecca Canal and this rooftop

terrace in its warm orange glow. Magic hour became plural. Magic *hours*. I still appreciate it even though Gwen didn't. *Pleasant*, she remarked as we stepped onto the terrace of the Hotel Danieli, the majestic view of the canal fanning out like a peacock before us.

Pleasant is crazily understating it. I should have known then that something was amiss.

Everything is still, everything set out in its place. That damned yacht remains as obscene as ever, ruining a perfect Venetian scene. But at least I can no longer hear its vile occupants, their boozed-up gesticulations now a rich kid's game of musical statues. I wonder how long they can hold their poses.

Speaking of poses, I've held mine for too long now and need to move while I still can. But even as I sit here, my deadening hand rests in my left pocket, guarding its precious bounty.

The truth is I planned all along to do it, to stop time that is. But not like this. No, I'd saved my gift for that special moment – a wondrous firework, not a flare.

That's what Mr Peppermint said I should do.

It's hard to imagine these days, but there was a time when it easy to get lost in the world. And somehow the three of us did: Dom, Lee and me. We hadn't meant to run away; that's just how things turned out. And it's how's Mr Peppermint found us alone in the woods.

He fed us, looked after us, and kept us warm for the few too-brief hours that we knew him. But in that time, he told us about his *gifts*. *Gifts* he wanted to pass on to us.

"O.T. O.T.O." he'd said. "One Time. One Time Only. So... Make. It. Count," he warned the three of us, this old man with the blood shot eyes and easy grin. "There are no do-overs. These are gifts, these things I've given each of you. I couldn't keep a-hold of them anymore. I need to pay 'em forward before I go. But it's a special thing, you have. There for you to use, in light or dark, preferably the

former. But if no positive motivation is to be found—," his old face creased in a serious manner, and, even by the dimly lit campfire, his uniquely blue eyes were visible as they probed us in turn—"it can be your own personal ejector seat. But do try to use it to embellish something special." Mr Peppermint's face reverted to its glowing smile, his hands aloft as if arranging a floral bouquet. "Put a sheen on it. Make it beautiful." He winked at me.

We heard our parents calling shortly after, which was Mr Peppermint's cue to leave. Before he took off, he pulled me close to whisper into my ear, his cloying peppermint aroma clouding around my head. "And you in particular, Blondie. A special moment. That's what *yours* is for." And then he was gone, back into the dark forest we found him in.

As was Lee. Gone. All in the blink of an eye. Our parents berated us when they found us that next morning, asking where we'd been over the past couple of days. Whatever could have driven us to do such a thing, to worry them all like that.

But more urgently, where was Lee?

We knew to keep our mouths shut. Dom and I - we were special now, you see. We couldn't explain any of this if we tried, not to our mothers, fathers, Lee's frantic parents, nor the police who later left the case sit unsolved. But Dom and I knew. Lee hadn't disappeared. We just couldn't see him. Because that was *his* gift. He's probably still out there.

Same for Dom. His gift was flight. I haven't seen him for years. He may be in the skies right now, suspended like a kite for all I know.

My gift was used tonight, which was always the idea. You see, there are many uses for it. But I'd figured this out a few months ago, when I knew we were coming here, when I knew I'd be asking Gwen to marry me. That look on her face, astonishment turning to sheer

happiness—I wanted to catch that precise moment between the two emotions. And I wanted to savour it for as long as I could.

It's not the expression currently staring back at me. I've been here now for probably three hours or so. (Again, my watch can neither confirm nor deny this.) I've spent most of the time studying her face, looking for any semblance of the girl I once knew. But no—it's a look of malice spread across the face turned away from me, out towards the Canal. As if she can no longer endure the pained expression on my face that her words have caused. Words with sharp, jagged edges, ones I haven't been able to blunt with the bottle of Amarone I downed since hearing. I've moved on to a second bottle, a Monfortino 1995, a more expensive vintage according to the menu. Not that I will be getting the check at the end of this. It tastes divine and it's doing its trick. But with nothing else to distract me, the earlier scene plays on loop.

Disappointment has been a constant over the past few months, but I recently gained a fresh sense of perspective on my life. All this time, I'd been seeking gratification through my academic pursuits, which would naturally lead to a successful career and galvanize a sense of *being*. Fresh off another rejection and subsequent spiral, I realised something important: that, despite my gift, I'd never really felt special at any point since childhood. Not until the moment I met her.

She, Gwen, actually made me feel special.

And it's not her smile, nor her canny ability to mine humour out of any crisis that I conjure up in my mind.

It's not just her eyes, with their constant child-like wonder, nor the way she can turn any mundane moment into something truly magical.

It's not through her patience with me over the past few months, with my inability to keep my mind on track during interviews. She listened. She understood. She encouraged me to get back on the horse.

It's not just in recognition of her constant caring when I'm sick—the crippling headaches, the increasing ringing in my ears—listening as I lied my ass off about fictitious doctor appointments. They never happened because I knew what *this* was. And God only knows how Mr Peppermint lasted so long harbouring *all three* gifts.

It's not because of her understanding when life wasn't turning out the way we thought it would, always there to tell me the time would come. Telling me the night is always darkest just before the dawn.

No, it's *all* of the above. Gwen was the person I wanted to spend eternity with.

Which brings me to tonight: I made the dinner reservation months ago, around about the time I booked the hotel, the flights, the whole thing. I just wanted to mark our time together and celebrate what Gwen meant to me. A little romance on the terrace. Picture-postcard quality, a memory that would last. But then I got to thinking: why not make it even more special? Eternal, even. Because she would never for one minute guess.

You see, I was always the one who avoided such talk about commitment. (Not that there was any doubting that.) But she knew how my mind works. Our situation didn't exactly smack of Hallmark domestic bliss. And with me being a perfectionist, she likely surmised that it might be a few more years before I felt content with the life I could offer her. When the moment would be *just right*.

But there was always that other thing: the gift, and how it corroded my being Even though it was completely within my control, I felt, well, *scared* of it, and what it was beginning to do to me, especially over the past year. The headaches were getting worse. The ringing in my ears was getting louder. The whites of my eyes grew redder every day. It was all going somewhere, and I wasn't sure if I wanted Gwen to be around if—or when—things went south.

But then, the most obvious inspiration struck me. I could *use* the gift, couldn't I? And then it would be gone. But I needed

to use it on something precious. That *special moment*, Mr Peppermint spoke of. And I decided right there and then. And tonight's the night.

We had the terrace. The meal, as delicious as it was expensive. (*Very*.) The two of us. The perfect vista. *Almost*.

That fucking yacht, a violent affront to the timeless beauty in the background. A spit-polished turd bobbing upon gleaming waters. And if the object itself wasn't garish enough, the neanderthals onboard sealed the deal. College kids, all guys, partying away on daddy's boat, fully aware that everyone could see (and fully expecting everyone to look). In their pristine whites, wrestling each other and dancing along to some bullshit rap music, they released a vulgar smog that choked out the sweet notes emanating from St Mark's Square.

I remarked to Gwen that they were ruining the moment. She shrugged, couldn't give a shit. She seemed pre-occupied, nervous even.

Conversation was strained; it had been since we arrived in Venice, but the awkwardness intensified in the hours leading up to dinner. She knew I'd booked a special meal—there was no way around telling her as we needed to dress accordingly, ditching the Chuck Taylors and the Gap shorts for one night—but it wasn't nerves on her part, just this weird, standoffish energy. And when we finished our entrée and I took her hands in mine, I sensed a hesitancy in the tautness of her fingers. I ignored it and looked deeply into her eyes, ready to spill.

She beat me to the punch.

Unblinking. Staring a hole through me. She spoke. Staccato, in ALL CAPS, the words came. Mary Austin. A night of a thousand eyes. A drunken miscalculation on my side. A momentary lapse on the dance floor. A slow dance to end the night. A hand on a hip, a head on a shoulder. That's all.

It was also three years ago. And while it became the talk

of the Costco shopfloor, neither Mary nor I thought anything of it. Neither did Gwen when I 'fessed up the next day. Sure, she probably verified it with mutual friends, but it never came up again.

Until now. Why now?

Words cut like daggers as I spun on the wheel of death, one after another, each finding a vital artery. *Lack of commitment*. Wham. *Loss of trust*. Wham. *Feeling abused*. Wham. But then silence. She took a moment, looking away, onto the golden waters of the canal. She looked down, steeling herself to say something.

She talked about our love being one-sided. That I was the only one for her. Or so she thought anyway. She spoke of time, some variation on Seneca's dictum on how we waste what little we have. So, she needed to be careful with how it's spent. And *who* it's spent with.

And that's when it struck me.

This is the end. She's ending things.

I felt my heart stop in my chest. I knew what was coming. I couldn't let her see me cry. I looked into the distance, at the sun ceding to the night. But my glance stuck back on that fucking yacht, midway across the water. The rich kids were now gathered around a table, playing beer pong. No interest in the beauty around them as they laughed and shouted at each other. A blot on a timeless landscape. Not that they gave a shit – they'll never know consequences. Or true hurt. Living it up while I was dying inside. Their wild eyes. Shit-eating grins. Their...

That's when I squeezed my eyes shut, closed my fists into tight balls, pictured a grain of sand halting its descent.

That's when it all stopped.

Everything.

And that's where she is now. Frozen. Looking out, away from me. And what's that? Is that a smile there, forming at the corner of her mouth? A smile, almost threatening to turn into a grin. Which would lead to a laugh. Laughing?

She was loving this. *Loving* what she was doing to me. Who the fuck is this person? I don't even know this Macys' storefront dummy sitting here. This vicious fucking bitch, masquering as the one I was willing to give everything up for. *Everything*.

I gulp the wine from the glass as I stand up, my last one. It's started tasting... weird. Spoiled. Losing its liquidity, feeling more substantial. Like stout but without the bitterness. I swill it around my mouth before spitting it over the terrace side as I head for the exit. Gwen, for her part, decides to stay right where she is. To think about things for a little while. Not that she has much choice.

If anyone was to suddenly move, I'd have a heart attack.

It's quite unnerving, this version of St Mark's Square: a thousand or so figures, all frozen in state. Unblinking. Not a muscle stirring. Various expressions caught in their moment, but the same dullness in the eyes. I walk among them, seeking some glimmer of life. A twitch, some semblance of energy. But no. I'm playing the world's biggest game of Red Light, Green Light. But I can't turn my back.

It's the nearest couple that I can't stop gazing at, dining on the periphery of one of the restaurants, edging into the danger zone of the Square's vortex. Him—looking at his partner with an inquisitive expression, mouth slightly ajar mid-question. Her—fork in mouth, unable to answer his poorly timed enquiry. It may be about the day they've had. Plans for the evening, perhaps. Most likely, he's asking her how the Moules Mariniére is that she's devouring. It certainly looks more appealing than his Club Sandwich. God only knows how much that simple choice cost in this dining real estate.

A thought comes to mind, a way to rid myself of the burning sensation in my pocket. Using the dessert fork, I delicately prise open one of the shells in the pile, careful, so as not to crack it. Success. I remove the mussel, taking a moment to savour its taste; it's

as delicious as it looks. From my pocket, I extract the pink tissue papered bundle and slowly unwrap the diamond engagement ring within. White gold. Eighteen karat. Four thousand, seven hundred and eighty dollars. That's three months salary. Seventy-two days of unpacking in cold warehouses before the sun rises, heaving 4K TV sets into fancy cars, and dealing with the egregious demands of ungrateful customers. I don't think about it anymore. I carefully lay it in the shell, upon its bed of chopped garlic and white wine cream. I close the shell with a tender hand. Voila! The scene: unknowing fiancée-to-be enjoys her succulent seafood entrée while her (equally oblivious) partner prepares to pop the question. It almost makes me want to start the clock again to see how the scene unfolds. Almost. It's good where it is. A hypothetical, neither *here* nor *not-here*. Schrodinger's Bling.

I down a glass of Aperol Spritz as I leave, nearly choking on the spoiled liquid. The accumulating booze combined with the new-found feeling of levity puts a pep in my step. I stumble towards the band, nearly tripping over a static dog at the last moment, fully stretched out in a gallop towards its owner.

I admire the caricatures set before me: musicians in creative flux, faces creased in joyful concentration. I want to join the scene. I pluck the string of the double bass, severing the silence with a sharp note. I plink away for a little while for an unappreciative audience. Tough gig. I try out all the instruments I can; the piano, the violin, but I can't quite free the trumpet from the hand of the sharply dressed fella clutching it.

I notice the dog again, head of steam, charging towards its owner who is bent down with an excited expression frozen across her face. I notice the line behind the dog, hovering in the air like ice. Like a plane's contrail, formed in rapidity. I pluck it, the line bending before recorrecting itself with a *plink* noise. I skip back and forth, playing between the double bass and the dog's airborne footprint for some time. I don't think a trained ear would know the

difference. Quincy Jones, maybe.

I consider walking past the guard, straight into Doge's Palace. The cost of the meal meant I had to cut this corner. Gwen didn't care about missing out, but I did. Especially now. But a sudden urge compels me to turn around, take in the scene around me.

I don't need the museum. Because what I have—what I've created—is my own life-size model of Piazzo San Marco. A diorama of Venice today, complete with struggle, desperation and a kind of dying. The death of ambition, for sure. I wander amongst the living statues, look into their eyes, and find only dullness. It's a mundanity reflected in their attire, a distinct lack of vitality in their faces, certainly no sense of wonder. Nor creativity, or sense of inspiration. I see complacency, the common enemy of all the forementioned. We've never had it so good, so easy. We no longer have to dream. The minutiae will take care of us. I can only imagine what the artists of the Renaissance would make of all this. I wonder if their spirits roam this square, weaving amongst their contemporaries. How would they view this life now? Are they impressed by the fashions, the technology, the relative ease of life? Or are they aghast? Assuming their absence, I'll speak for the dead. And yes, *we're* fucking aghast.

I don't need to see Bosch's vision of hell either. I have my own here. In real-time, in a manner of sorts anyway. I call this piece 'Arrested Debasement', a clash between the vulgar and the natural. It's wherever I turn. The flag-wielding tour guide, face frozen in a state of steely determination, as if marching her army into Helm's Deep. My fellow Americans, in a city known for its gastronomy, emerge from the U.S. candy store clutching dayglow slurpees. And the phones, aloft as far as the eye can see. I figure at least half of them are fixed in this grotesque stance, capturing the moment they're *not* living in for onward gratification. Each of them a singular hell. Cumulatively, a pox upon this place.

They're all mine now. I could rearrange them into any dis-

play I want. I could do a lot more. I could fuck with them, pulling their entitled little faces into hellish grimaces. Move their hands onto places, *private places*, unpause and watch the shit go down. I could touch them wherever I wanted. I don't need Lee's invisibility to do something lurid here, something dirty. I could have my way while looking into their unblinking eyes, wondering if there's anything still in there. A sense of comprehension.

But that's not me. I'm not that guy, not even the repressed kind. Regardless of whether I was or not, I know from the trumpet experience that I just don't have the power. I'm just tired now. Sick and tired. I want to sleep. Maybe I'll wake up in a better frame of mind.

Without her.

The thought is enough to ensure I won't, but it's the little boy beside me who's the clincher: as my head drops, out of fatigue, out of heartbreak, I catch him out of the corner of my eye and become transfixed. Can't be any older than two, maybe three. Standing with an expression of wonder, staring at someone, a parent perhaps, crouched down with a blue and gold Venetian mask held to their face. The boy gazes at the pretty façade, ignoring the reality behind it. The eyes of the child dance with possibility. Unspoilt. Before the real world digs its claws in. Before the pain. Smile stretched wide, look of unbridled joy. Preserved, like the entire moment.

It would be rotten of me to spoil it. No, I must go so this can carry on.

And with a theatrical "take it from the top" holler to the band, I walk away from the Square, towards the Giudecca Canal.

The sun sinks behind the San Giorgio. The still waters pull me forward, visual sirens, their blood orange pigmentation promising warmth and vitality. And certainty.

I wonder if she can see me now, from the rooftop over there.

As I wade in backwards, I can just about make out her form. She *was* looking in this direction when I stopped everything. And while I can't see her smirk, I can feel it cutting into me. Well do you see *me*, sweetness? I wonder what it feels like. Does she feel suspended? Locked into a form of sleep paralysis? A witness unable to interfere, unable to stop what I'm about to do. Like everyone else, really. So many silent witnesses. No one to pull me out. No tide to push me out. Just little old me. And down I go.

It's a strange sensation, this submergence. Going under is difficult; the water feels gelatinous, no movement or oxygen pulsing through it. And I'm not sure what it will do to my body. I won't be picked at, that's for sure. The fish I see are just *there*. Motionless. Like holographic images in the darkness, present but not so. I may be preserved for some time to come. But not forever. Not like *them*.

It doesn't flood into my nose or mouth, fully agape. I feel strangely insulated from still waters that no longer ebb and flow. They rest upon me, warming me through; their temperature permanently set to *pleasant*. But I need them to do more. *Breathe in. Swallow. Breathe in. Swallow.*

I struggle but manage to inhale; the water eventually loosens up, invading on every intake of breath. This is what sinking in quicksand must feel like. My body jerks and ticks, survival instincts kicking in. I fight the temptation to chew it up and spit it out. No, this, *this*, is good for me.

As it takes hold, I notice the red hue surrounding me is no longer blood orange. It's angry, like the blossoming angst around a mosquito bite. Which makes me its pale centre, doesn't it? Ground zero of the whole fucking shebang. As the red gives way to black, my mind slips into the darkness knowing that there is no-one capable of unpicking all this. Like Gwen said earlier, I'm...

FRIDAY. SUNRISE.

... the only one. For me anyway. But the feeling wasn't mutual, was it? And I think it's time. Time *we owned up to a few things.* Time *I showed you that I wasn't to be taken for granted.* Time *is all we have, and I don't want to spend a moment of that precious commodity living a lie...*

Hahaha, I must stop that now; t's way too funny, even in mime. I'm battling to maintain my face in this oh-so stern manner while saying this silly stuff, spitting this vitriol into the bathroom mirror. I'm going to crack up at any moment, and he's sleeping in. My poor boy. The aircon has played havoc with Will's sinuses overnight, and I don't wish to wake him. More than anything, it would show my hand.

I never studied method acting, so my "performance" over the past few days has taken a lot out of me. But it's given so much joy to think of the ridiculousness of me bringing up that silly misunderstanding over that colleague of his. Mary Austin was like three years ago. It makes me giggle to think about it now. But no—I never doubted his commitment for one second, not then—even more so now. But it'll work nicely for tonight. I just need a ruse, a nice little contrast in mood, maximum drama to take us down before launching ourselves to a place we've never been before. A new wonderful peak in our relationship. *Then* he'll understand. But damn, if he even just picks up a hint of a smile early on, he'll know it's all bullshit. And

I'm, like, a terrible liar; if the grin comes, the floodgates will open. Oh, I'll become a full-blown hyena. And then he'll wonder what I'm *really* playing at.

Like I said, it's time.

Ever since college, I've known he's the one. It's a lovely big wide world, but I know I'll never meet anyone else with such wonderful, rare qualities. A generosity of nature that I can't comprehend, always thinking of me, making me feel like I'm the only one in this world—no, this universe.

He makes me feel... special.

He has his problems, we all do. He's shy, yes. And the last year or so has destroyed what little confidence he had. He has struggled to cope with those symptoms of his – the doc tells him its stress related, and I must take Will on face value that he's getting the right medical advice. But there's the constant knockbacks from the jobs he's applying for, in spite of a strong academic resume. He never gets past the first interview, likely on account of his nerves. But he doesn't know how strong he is. He has power, he just needs to unlock it. I see him. I know he will come out good.

But more than anything, he's always been there for me. He always will be. We're meant to be together. And that's why tonight's the night.

I'd planned this for weeks but couldn't bring anything with me. Most guys seem content to sit back and let their woman do all the vacation prep, but Will isn't that kind. He's all-in—planning, packing, checking, double-checking. No doubt he would've found any small and discreet package I might be able to stow away. So, while he was in the mask store yesterday, I snatched the time to go into one of the glass ornament stores a few alleyways away.

That's where I'd spotted them on the first day. One for him: purple tinged with a black undercurrent. His favourite mix of colours. Mine is green. Like those emerald eyes of his, like nothing I've ever seen before, nothing I'll ever see maybe until the end of time. And that's how I plan on spending the rest of my days, gazing into

those green eyes of his.

He won't expect this; for one, he's a traditionalist. It was always his place to make the move. Sadly, he's also a staunch idealist. He'll wait and wait until we have our *House Beautiful* magazine version of domesticity. He thinks that's what I want. Silly Willy.

No. All I want is him.

I can hardly wait for it all, a lifetime together of stolen kisses, precious moments, and living out our dreams. But that's all to come. For now, we have tonight. My offering. His hopeful affirmation. And his sweet face through it all.

I pat the rings in my pocket. It's a moment, I know, that I'll wish could last forever.

9. 1948, Ezeiza, Buenos Aires

Manon Allard, ten-year-old daughter
of the French ambassador, lugs
the book, heavy as a stone tablet,
large as her torso, and lets it fall
to the table in the library's private
reading room with a satisfying thud.
Albertson's Northern Deciduous Taxonomy.

Manon loves anything green and
growing, delights in vines
spiraling up the trellis to her bedroom
window, rejoices in blooms and
pollen-dusted bodies in
bee-loud glades. She opens the book

and it falls to the center, to a yellowed
sheaf of paper folded inside.

She spreads the pages and furrows beneath
a curtain of blonde curls, stares at a
language she can't read—German she
supposes—and calls to Jules, her
tutor, who joins her at the table,
his own arms laden with books.

THIS IS THE CONCLUSION OF A FOURTEEN PART POEM. READ PARTS ONE THROUGH EIGHT **HERE** →

He delays a moment to open
the reading room window, inviting
the breeze to enter the stuffy upper room.

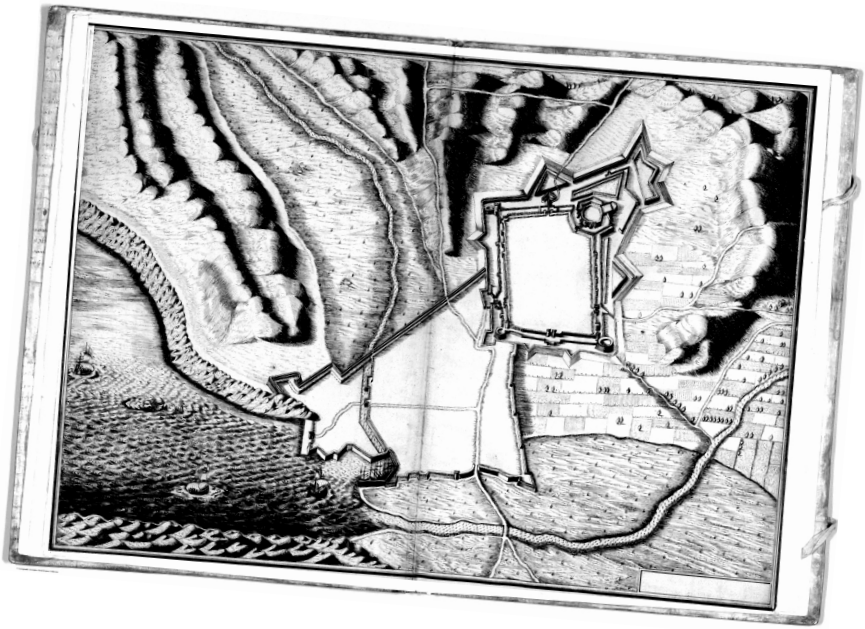
Please read this to me, she asks, all
dimples and curtsies, entranced
with the present, open to the
future. He obliges as always,
and stops to offer context where
needed. *Vermont is in America,*
he says. *Why wouldn't one say*
nom de plume? they laugh.
He reads on, and feels the lines
lift him like a rod puppet,
propelling him forward. He
should stop, he knows,
at the flesh, but his eyes are moths
before the yellow of the pages.

When he finally looks up
at story's end, he hears none of
Manon's usual questions, hears
only faint adult cries from below,
as he leans out the window,
sees the small body
haloed with curls
on the cobblestones.

10. Session Zero, Session One

Why did this written child fall
from this written window?
Because Noomi wanted it so,
wanted those who listened,
who participated, to feel
the impossible weight
of that tiny body, dense as
a meteorite plummeting to earth,
wanted them to see how stories spread
parasitically, vermicular.
She wanted to set the stakes,
and this small death
was the appropriate cost,
that October night
in Santa Cruz.

But Noomi Ortez was fair
as always, and kind as she was
wise, beyond her twenty-two years.
As her players gathered around
the basement table for her
Halloween one-shot, she gave
trigger warnings, she listened,
she honored the consensus
on content. Her four friends weren't



blind, they knew the unsettling
evil of the mage
Mardrosk, having faced him
in two prior campaigns. Now,
at last, they would trace him
to his origin. They would venture
past the fantastic plane of
Foruna, leaving behind pastoral
cottages and medieval villages,
to travel by spells and portals,
tracking his machinations
through times and worlds,
finally arriving, enchanted blades

drawn, staffs glowing with eldritch
power, to cut short this half-gestated
evil in the ice-crusted
town square of
Whitworth, Vermont.

11. TPK

Curran the Ranger fell first in the clash.
After his arrow was loosed from his bow
And struck the black cloak, its shaft burned to ash,
The mage turned around, his eyes a red glow.

Curran stood boldly and shouted a threat
As blood-eldritch beams ripped through the night air.
Curran, their leader, had oft laughed at death.
Now he was bones in the cold of the square.

Aylith, the druid, the third of her name,
Lay drained of her life, the husk of an elf,
While Etcher, the crow-man, burst into flame.
The gnome became stone, a bust of herself.

Noomi, in guise of their guide, stood alone.
She wouldn't go gently. But she would go.

12. Baja Blasted

Noomi's mother Rosa paints,
watercolors mostly, on Saturday
mornings, the only time she has free from
factory nightshifts and weekday errands.
She'd claimed the small unfinished
room off the basement and set up
an easel, the only place she'd asked
Noomi and her friends to leave
alone. They're good kids—well—
young adults, and they listened.

Rosa is used to Noomi's gaming
on Friday nights, marathon
sessions that stretch past
midnight, is used to going to
bed with the kids' cars
still in the driveway. But waking
this morning, with an idea for
an abstract painting in her
head, something
incongruous about the upward
drift of ash over snow,
she looks out the kitchen window
before heading downstairs,
sees the driveway still full.

As she reaches the top
of the basement steps, her
thoughts turn to her own
car, two payments behind, to
this rented house, half the size
of their prior home, to her
husband, Noomi's father,
a scarecrow of his former
self as the cancer took him last
fall. The same thoughts
today as everyday, the same
stories that don't take
the weekend off. She thinks
of ash and snow
and loss, how art is hard to
master, but losing comes
so easily, so readily, as though
each life had an inexhaustible
supply of treasures to spare.

Now, at the bottom, she opens
the door and steps into silence,
a silence that seems like playacting
at first, as Noomi and her friends
sit rigid at the table, staring into
space, unblinking, as Rosa
grabs Noomi, shakes and shakes,
the only other movement
being the small, slow drip of
Baja Blast from the corner of
her comatose daughter's mouth.

13. Rejected Violent Visions *Capsule Review, December 2024*

Tendrils of Terror by Edwina Barron, Darklight Books

In the upcoming *Tendrils of Terror* from Darklight Books, Edwina Barron wears the intestines of her influences on her bloodstained sleeves, but also flexes her own inimitable voice on every page, with phrases like, "the small, slow drip of Baja Blast from the corner of her comatose daughter's mouth."As in her prior collection, *Nested, Necrotic,* she pulls no punches, and invites you to walk face-first into every blow. You're in, or you're out, and if you're out, close the cover and walk away. Don't blame the story for clearly being what it says on the tin.

Barron takes the reader on a metatextual ride through time, space, and art itself. She interrogates the ways stories nest inside each other, infect one another, steal shamelessly, spread and bloat. Her writing is beautiful, yes, but as the poets say, beauty is the beginning of terror, and terror can't happen without someone to terrify.

Stories, even our own, are predators in need of prey; parasites in need of hosts. No story is complete until it reaches an audience, until a person opens the cover and steps inside the written woods, walks to the written cabin, peers through the written window, through their own reflection in the breath-frosted glass, and asks, *Wait, whose woods are these, anyway?*

14. Remedial Literature 101,
One
of
One

On such a written journey, what
would you bring? Only
your entire self, only
your inviolate double-helix
as unique as each snowflake lofting
on your eyelashes, only every
experience you've ever had,
parading through your mind,
the strange music of that exquisite
procession, an endless loop of
all you are and ever have
been. Your childhood dog
dead from worms, the
thick warm juice from
cantaloupes in June, your
mother's cigarette smoke
yellowing your school
clothes, your first kiss backstage
at the sixth-grade winter play,
his cheeks red as holly berries,
the sound of the screen door slamming
when she left last time
for the last time,

every failed interview, every
hangnail and headcold, every song
you've memorized, even ironically,
every book,
every page,
every
word. Only that,
and
nothing more.

Deep in the woods
the cabin door opens,
sick yellow light
stains the snow crusting
your boots. You've come
so far, and you're so
very cold. It might
feel more comfortable
inside.

=eat at=

KO'S

Trudging up the bunny slope-height hill, Troy brushed himself clear for the eighth time. *What's the point?* The snow came halfway up to his shins and errant snowflakes swirled around him from drifts that stretched wide across the plains. The plows might've not been by in hours, and the only indicators that the highway still existed were the faint twin trails traced by the earlier traffic's tires. The overpass cast the highway in shadow, over which a bright green sign reflected the only traces of light to mark the path.

US HWY 10

To his left, the vast wall of grey-black offered no promise, no visible farmhouses, no friendly grandparents with landlines still tacked to their kitchen walls.

To his right, beyond what appeared to be an exit sign, a glow illuminated the swirling flurries, one neither moon-blue nor the warm yellow nitrogen of the streetlights lining the interstate.

Wet, cold, and gripping his green-grey overcoat tight around his abdomen, Troy plodded a path towards the offramp.

He was soon offered an unobstructed view of the light source: a single-story metal building, illuminated in red and teal neon. The parking lot was blown over with snow, the windows nearly covered in white, but the lights inside glowed a warm hue. More promising was the small, red-neon sign nestled in the top-right corner of the far-left windows that mercifully read OPEN.

Probably won't let me use the phone unless I buy at least a shitty cup of coffee.

Still, it was the only sign of life visible along the lonely stetch of highway.

As the water splattered across the surface of the *shichirin*, it evaporaed into a backwards cascade that snaked and hissed up towards the tin-plated roof and under the humming exhaust hood. On its way, the wet heat coated Aneko's face. (Not that it was unwelcome; the steam from the grill offered some of the only warmth in the restaurant.)

Aneko wiped the condensation from her brow with the sleeve of her whites and turned on her non-slip shoes towards the open floorplan of the diner. Very open and very empty. The floors had already been mopped shiny-wet; the smell of disinfectant laced the edges of the air above the red-pleather booths.

"Shelby!" Aneko called across the room. "Thirty-minute warning!"

In the center booth, Shelby – in an oversized hoodie and messy, top-of-the-head blond bun – pulled out an earbud and turned two bleary eyes from her laptop.

"I'm sorry, Aneko. I'm almost ready to call it a night, I promise."

Aneko worked a drying rag over an already-clean counter. *Yes, you're always almost done.*

Every night the restaurant was open, Shelby was there. She would order her usual (shrimp ramen and a bottomless pot of green tea), plug in her headphones, open her laptop, and prop up whichever battered-cover, community college textbook the night called for. Aneko would keep her pot full and leave her alone until it was time to lock up for the night.

"What's the subject of the night tonight?" Aneko asked.

"Organic Chem," Shelby yawned, resting her chin in her open hand. "I still don't know why I decided to torture myself with

it, but my advisor said it would look good on my transcripts when I transfer."

Aneko exhaled sharply and shook her head. "I'll leave you alone, then. Just please, keep an eye on the clock. We close at midnight."

"Always," Shelby offered. After a quick stretch, she popped her earbud back in and returned to her self-inflicted torture.

Behind the student, the floor-to-ceiling windows opened to the blissful, quiet dark of the rural highway. Lit in warm streetlight, the sign marking the exit to Highway 10 stood out in stark contrast to the moonlit expanse of snow.

Swish! The doors flew open with a cold rush of air (although the stillness outside gave no hint of wind). A young man in a long, wet coat, soaked grey slacks, and polished black shoes struggled to shut the door behind him. The whole of his weight finished the job; he slumped down limp against it, streaking bits of slush down the length of the glass.

Aneko set down her rag and brought up her best smile.

"Welcome to Ko's."

⚠

Troy jolted his head upright with a large, heavy gasp. As he gathered his bearings, his labored breaths eased as he adjusted to the stillness and warmth.

A light (but clear) voice resonated from across the room. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

Behind the counter stood a young woman with beetle-black eyes and sleek, black hair pulled back tight – bangs, stray hairs, and all – clad an impeccably clean chef's uniform secured under a bright white apron.

Troy stood and surveyed the diner. Its bones appeared very much to be those of a small town, greasy spoon establishment spackled over with orientalist décor: the overhanging light pendants had

been covered in black-painted wicker and rice paper, black vases with pale pink blossoms adorned each of the booth tables, and Minnesotan scenes – the cherry in a spoon sculpture in Minneapolis, one of the giant Paul Bunyon statues from either Brainard or Bemidji – were rendered in the wispy watercolors of Edo-period Japan and hung over gentle, slate grey walls. In contrast, the typical greasy-spoon black and white tile checkerboard appeared unchanged (although, unusually, laid unmarred by the boot-scuffs of the interstate truckers.)

"May I get you anything?"

Troy fixed his gaze back to the black-haired woman. "This... this is a restaurant? A Japanese restaurant?" *In an old diner. In the middle of nowhere.* The closest population was shy of ten thousand in Detroit Lakes. In many areas of rural Minnesota, 'Minnesota sushi' was daring your friend to eat a live minnow while out ice fishing. Troy would know – it was a favorite hazing ritual in his old fraternity.

The young woman laughed, shook her head, and cast her eyes down towards the well-polished countertop.

"Japanese-Minnesotan fusion, actually," she clarified. "I'm still waiting to be featured in on one of those hipster foodie blogs, but it hasn't happened yet."

She gestured towards one of the stools along the length of the counter. "We're closing pretty soon, but if you need to stay her for a while, I can make you something quick."

Troy blinked a few times. "Yeah...my car spun out on the highway. I need to call for a tow."

He turned his head back towards the wide front windows. *The car, the ditch, the blizzard...why does it all feel so far away now?* He could probably still see the gash his car had carved into the fresh snow.

The woman nodded toward the stool closest to her. "Please. Sit down."

Troy barely remembered standing up from the entrance. Still somewhat dazed, he found his seat and checked his pocket for his cellphone. *Still there*, and as he found himself, somehow unscathed by the accident. He fished out his wallet and the AAA card inside. "I'll take a cup of coffee."

"No coffee," the waitress (*waitress? Chef? Owner?*) returned alongside a laminated menu. She tucked a fallen strand of hair behind her ear. "But you can have as many pots of green tea as you like."

Troy wrinkled his nose. He had a girlfriend in college who drank the stuff by the gallon. She'd talked him into going vegan, made plans to name their future kids after plants and songbirds, and broke the whole thing off before senior year to join the Peace Corps in Sri Lanka. "Fine, tea then." He dialed the number for AAA.

She fashioned a deep blue ceramic teapot from an out-of-view shelf and set it under the hot water dispenser. Troy noted the hand painted cherry blossom branch on the side and stifled a sigh. There was 'keeping in the theme of the restaurant', and then there was keeping your Midwestern demographic from complaining about the raw fish and asking where the damn cheese is at. As hot water filled the pot, the woman waved her hand over the steam, wafting it up toward her face.

After a quick ring, indistinct, tuneless music began to drone over the receiver. Troy put the phone on speaker, turned the volume a notch above zero, and set it down on the counter. "They never pick up when you first call," Troy sighed.

"Don't worry," the worker ripped the paper off a teabag, "we're not going anywhere."

"I thought you said you were closing soon."

The young woman's eyes directed his own towards the clock. 11:34. *No way it was late. How long was I knocked out? How long was I walking?* "I can stay here for as long as you need." She dropped a teabag into the pot and replaced the lid.

Troy's lips parted with a deep exhale. "Thanks," he said as the woman set down a teacup before him. "I really mean that. Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if I had to wait for service outside."

She smiled and pushed the menu closer. "Pick out something to eat while the tea steeps."

Troy scanned the offerings, chuckling at what was entailed by *Minnesotan-Japanese fusion*: "You really have a beer-battered walleye and spicy tuna roll?

"With roe and sriracha," the young woman nodded. "That might be a little too much for this time of night, but I could fix you the beef and tater tot don bowl."

Really? But then again, you couldn't really have a Minnesotan menu without tater tots. "Okay, beef and tater tot don bowl it is, then."

The young woman wiped her hands on the front of her apron and retreated through the swinging kitchen doors. Troy tapped his hands on his thighs to the low din of hold music and rotated his stool to take in the near-empty restaurant and had a difficult time imagining it being any busier at 5 PM. Stick a place like this in a Minneapolis neighborhood like Uptown or Northeast, they'd have the hoi polloi lined up and down the block. This far north, Troy couldn't imagine the locals could pronounce half the items on the menu, let alone order any of them.

In less time than anything more than a microwave could offer, the young woman returned from the kitchen with a steaming plate of tater tots. She set the platter down in front of Troy, ducked down behind the counter, and returned a see-through container filled with raw, shaved beef from under the counter.

"I'm Troy, by the way," he spoke, clearing his throat mid-sentence.

"Aneko," the woman introduced herself. From a plastic bottle, she squeezed a spiral of oil on the surface of the grill. Her free

hand clicked on the hood fan and the heat in quick succession.

"I've never met an Aneko before."

"Maybe I'm the only one," She dropped a portion of beef onto the warming stainless-steel. "Or maybe no one talks about me after they meet me."

When the meat began to sizzle, Aneko withdrew another plastic container from the service fridge, this one full of brightly colored sliced peppers. She prepared her ingredients with the graceful, delicate touch one might expect from a florist or a ballet dancer stretching before a performance.

"So...Aneko." There was a pause before she nodded to acknowledge his voice was audible over the pops of beef fat and the din of the ventilation. "Is this your restaurant? I haven't seen anyone else here."

Aneko nodded again and withdrew a chef's knife from the magnetic bar hanging over the grill. "On nights like this, I'm chef, waitress, and cleanup crew."

"So...is the restaurant named after you?" he pressed. "Ko's... Aneko...?"

"No..." Aneko slid the peppers onto the grill. "It's named for Takako Konishi. And Kumiko." She stirred them into the beef with the edge of the knife. "Both... neither... somewhere in between."

"I don't understand."

Aneko sighed and, with a large, unmarked steel shaker, seasoned the combination, tinging the smell of commercial-grade cooking oil with a jagged tang.

"It makes sense for where we are." Aneko flipped the top off an industrial-sized rice cooker and filled up a serving bowl. She used the edge of her knife to top it off with the mixture from the grill. "Things here have a way of being 'are' and 'aren't' at the same time."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Aneko turned back to the counter, sprinkling a handful of tater tots – one, two, three, four, five – over the top, like cherries on a sundae. Without a further word, she set the bowl in front of him,

staking a pair of steel chopsticks into the center. She took a seat before him on an unseen stool, produced a teacup identical to his, and poured the freshly steeped tea into both cups.

"So..." Troy began to fumble with his chopsticks. *Crook of the thumb...hold like a pencil...dammit, why couldn't they have those disposable sets with instructions on the wrapping paper?* "Are you going to tell what any of that's supposed to mean?"

Aneko cradled the cup with her fingers and took a long sip. Her dark eyelashes fluttered against the dewy flush of her cheeks. "Years ago, Takako was found dead in the snow, just a few miles from here. A hunter found her at dawn." Her hand produced a plastic fork from behind the counter. Out of some measure of pride, Troy shook his head and attempted once more to handle the chopsticks. "Before the sheriff could do any kind of investigation into her cause of death, the people living around here had already concocted their own stories about what happened to her."

I guess in a small town, people have nothing better to do. "What kinds of stories?"

"They started claiming she was a treasure hunter." Aneko rested both elbows on the countertop and refilled her teacup. "Have you ever seen the movie *Fargo*?"

Troy nodded. He'd managed to pick up a single tater tot. "I don't know anyone here who hasn't."

"Well," Aneko set her cup back on the counter, "the story eventually became death by misadventure, that Takako froze over while looking for the ransom suitcase." He pictured Steve Buscemi, face plastered in a bloody paper tower, marking the burial spot – a roadside snowdrift - with a small, bright red ice scraper before driving off to his death.

It was probably the point, but he always imagined that little scraper disappearing under a winter afternoon's worth of Minnesota weather.

"You know how in the beginning, they say the movie is

based on a true story? Well, the local talk became that Takako believed it. And since no one else reported finding the money, it was still out there, waiting for some intrepid young explorer to find it."

The same three measures of hold music filled the brief silence.

"Aren't you going to check where you are in the queue?" Aneko tilted her head toward the device.

Troy clicked the volume up button a couple of times. "I'll know when the music stops," Troy said. "People came up with that whole story just from a woman being found dead in the snow?"

Aneko nodded. "None of it turned out to be true, of course. It was suicide, a broken woman lost in a strange country. But the Fargo story is what everyone told each other, so it became the version everyone knew. And then someone made a movie out of it – *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* – and that became the story, a woman who died hunting for treasure."

"And *that's* why you built a Japanese restaurant in the middle of nowhere?"

"Japanese-Minnesotan *fusion*," Aneko reminded him. "So, what's your story? Tonight, I mean."

Troy huffed. "I had an accident and ended up in the weirdest restaurant in the state."

"An accident. Hm." She pushed Troy's phone toward him. "Well, they'll need at least a general idea of where your car is when they go out to find it. Where exactly did you crash?"

"Right. Um..." Troy rubbed his hand over his forehead.

"You were able to walk here. It couldn't be that far."

"Oh...yeah," His hand fell to the counter. "I was trying to take the exit and spun out into the ditch. They're definitely going to need a tow truck."

Aneko traced a finger along the rim of her cup. "Where were you going? Detroit Lakes?"

"Yeah, my buddy has a cabin up there. We were supposed to

meet up with a bunch of old friends. You know, spend the weekend playing cards and freezing our asses off."

Aneko offered a soft smile. "Maybe you should try giving your friend a call to let him know you'll be late."

"I'll call him as soon as I get off hold," Troy replied just a little too quickly, his words tumbling out. "But I still don't get it. Why would a woman dying near here inspire you to open a restaurant?"

Another long sip of tea. "It wasn't so much about a woman dying, or even so much the stories people told about her. Like I said, this is a place that seems to be one where things are both 'are' and 'aren't', both real and unreal. Call it metaphysical, quantum, whatever it is you need for it to make sense."

Troy tilted his head to the side. *Meta-quantum-what?*

Aneko set her teacup down for another refill. "I mean, what you said is true. Logically, a Japanese restaurant shouldn't thrive here. The locals think Italian is ethnic cuisine, and we barely get enough tourists from the Twin Cities to keep this place afloat. In fact, I think you're the first one I've had in over a month. And yet, I'm still here." She stretched up her arms, gesturing to the whole of the restaurant. "So, I suppose that in itself makes Ko's the perfect embodiment of the contradiction."

Troy shrugged off whatever the intended meaning was and returned to the don bowl. His chopstick skills were improving. "Well, it's good food, at least."

Aneko stretched her hands higher and let out an extended exhale. "Let's get back to your story," Her hands returned down to the counter. "Where is it you said you were coming from?"

"Minneapolis," Troy told her. "Well, Eden Prairie, actually, but—"

Aneko interrupted him. "But you drove up here to spend the weekend at a friend's cabin, correct?"

Troy nodded slowly. "Yes..."

"But you're not at your friend's cabin, are you? You're here,"

Aneko's voice fell to a whisper. "So why is that?"

"I told you. My car went into the ditch. I came in here to call for roadside service."

"And you're on the phone with them now, right?" Without breaking eye contact, she swiped her finger across the screen and hung up the call.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Aneko demurred. "Let me call them back for you."

Aneko redialed the number and hit the speaker button. A single ring echoed through the restaurant before the hold music looped again.

"Great! Now I have to—"

"Don't they normally start these calls with a recorded message? 'Triple A, please hold'?" Aneko asked. "I didn't hear anything like that. Did you?" The tune seemed to struggle to keep the same tempo as before. The digitized muzak rushed forward, then waned to a crawl, like a spring being pulled tight and let go.

"Hold on," Troy grabbed the phone. "I'll try redialing."

Aneko rested her chin in her hand. "Remember, you need to give them a good idea of where your car is. Where is it again?"

"It was...just off the exit."

"Yes, but which exit?"

Barely a full ring before the same rinky-dink wind-up tune played. Troy returned his gaze to Aneko with his brow furrowed. "What?"

"This is a highway. There are *many* exits. What number was it?"

Troy stammered out a jumble of consonant-laced nonsense, nothing that came close to sounding like numbers or memorial highway names.

"Tell me about your car," Aneko added. They'll need a description."

"Well, it's a black Lincoln—"

"Was it damaged at all?" Aneko pressed. "When it went into the ditch, I mean." Was there damage to the front? Did you scratch it on the side?"

His lips parted, but no sound came out anymore.

Aneko tried again. "Troy. What did the car look like when you walked away from it?"

After the silence hung in the restaurant air for three heartbeats, Troy finally answered. "...bad."

"Bad how?"

"I..." Troy struggled to force the words past his lips. "I was in an accident."

"Tell me about it."

Troy swallowed repeatedly, even though his mouth had gone completely dry, even after the tea. "I don't really know how it happened," he admitted softly. "There was no snow, they just salted the roads, but suddenly, I looked up and there was a set of headlights coming right at me... But it was okay, you know," Troy said quickly. "I mean, my car went into the ditch, but I was still able to climb out. I wasn't hurt."

"How do you know?" Aneko tapped her index finger against her cheek.

"Well, I walked all the way here, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did," Aneko remarked. "And you haven't taken off your coat since you got in. You must be getting hot."

"Hot? It's still wet from the snow." He opened the coat and looked down. The length of his shirt was covered in blood - darkened at the edge, bright red in the center.

Troy held his blood-coated hands out in front of him, as if not to touch himself or anything else. His mouth opened and closed in panicked gasps, expelling condensation like steam from teapot. His eyes flicked across the restaurant. Each time they met Aneko's, his expression became less bewildered, and all he could think about

was that little red ice scraper fading in the blinding white of the gathering snow.

Aneko placed the empty cup inside the half-eaten don bowl and carried both back into the kitchen. As she set the porcelain down gently into the deep sink, her gaze lifted to the dollar-store clock above the deep fat fryers.

11:57

Shelby sat studying in her usual booth, books strewn around her laptop, ramen bowl and teapot long empty. She bobbed her head along to an unheard tune.

Aneko stepped out from behind the counter and approached the booth. "We're about to close now, Shelby."

Shelby looked up. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Aneko traced her finger over the spiral of her college notebook. "I see you here every night, Shelby. You study so hard." She wore a look of kind concern. "When are you finally going to go home and visit your parents?"

"I just saw them over winter break," Shelby answered, reaching for a sociology book with a quarter of the paper cover ripped off. "I need to up my grades this semester if I'm going to transfer to the U. I'll see them in the spring when I have break again."

"I'm sure they miss you so much," Aneko replied, gathering up the teacup and the soup bowl. "You keep telling me how they wouldn't stop saying they loved you when you were driving out to your grandparents for Christmas."

Aneko glanced down to Shelby's purse, and the cellphone in the pocket. "You should at least give them a call or a text. Let them know you're doing okay."

Shelby paused, brow knotted, and shook her head. "It's late.

Neither of them will be awake past midnight. I can call them in the morning before class."

Aneko traced her thumb along the edge of the ramen bowl's crackled, blue-dyed edge. None of Ko's patrons spent the same amount of time; Shelby, though she had been coming for weeks, her head buried in this book or that, night after night, studying for a litany of different tests. She clung to those books the way a sea-wrecked man clings to a life raft before accepting it was a race between exhaustion and the predators swirling about.

After all these weeks, Aneko could only draw out the late evening trip with her parents along that slick, slippery highway. Other than papers and tests, it was the only bit of memory that might stand out from any other day Shelby experienced as a college student.

Her parents never made it to Ko's. Granted, Shelby often mentioned being asleep in the back of the car. Maybe they were waiting for her somewhere. Maybe not. Aneko had nothing to do with where customers went after they left Ko's. Her only job was to serve them and get them out the door.

Aneko sighed. "Alright. Just finish getting your things together. I need to close up." She cast her gaze over her shoulder towards the clock on the wall as it ticked away the last few seconds before midnight.

Three, two, one.

Shelby was settling down at the table, unwrapping her scarf with one hand and unpacking her books with the other. The clock read five.

"Good evening, Shelby," Aneko wiped her hands on her clean, white apron. "Shrimp ramen and green tea again?"

Dear Editor,

I'm writing this email Wednesday, June 24 2026 at 2:18 a.m. on a greyhound from Philly to Des Moines. I don't know anyone there. I don't care. I had to leave.

They wouldn't stop leaving notes apartment, even when I locked my windows and blocked my door with furniture overnight. By morning, everything is in its original place. It's like nothing ever happened.

I put in cameras to try and catch them, but the video always glitches half-way through. The picture gets foggy, warps, skips, and suddenly all everything just resets - like someone flipped a switch. It's can't take it anymore. They won't leave me alone.

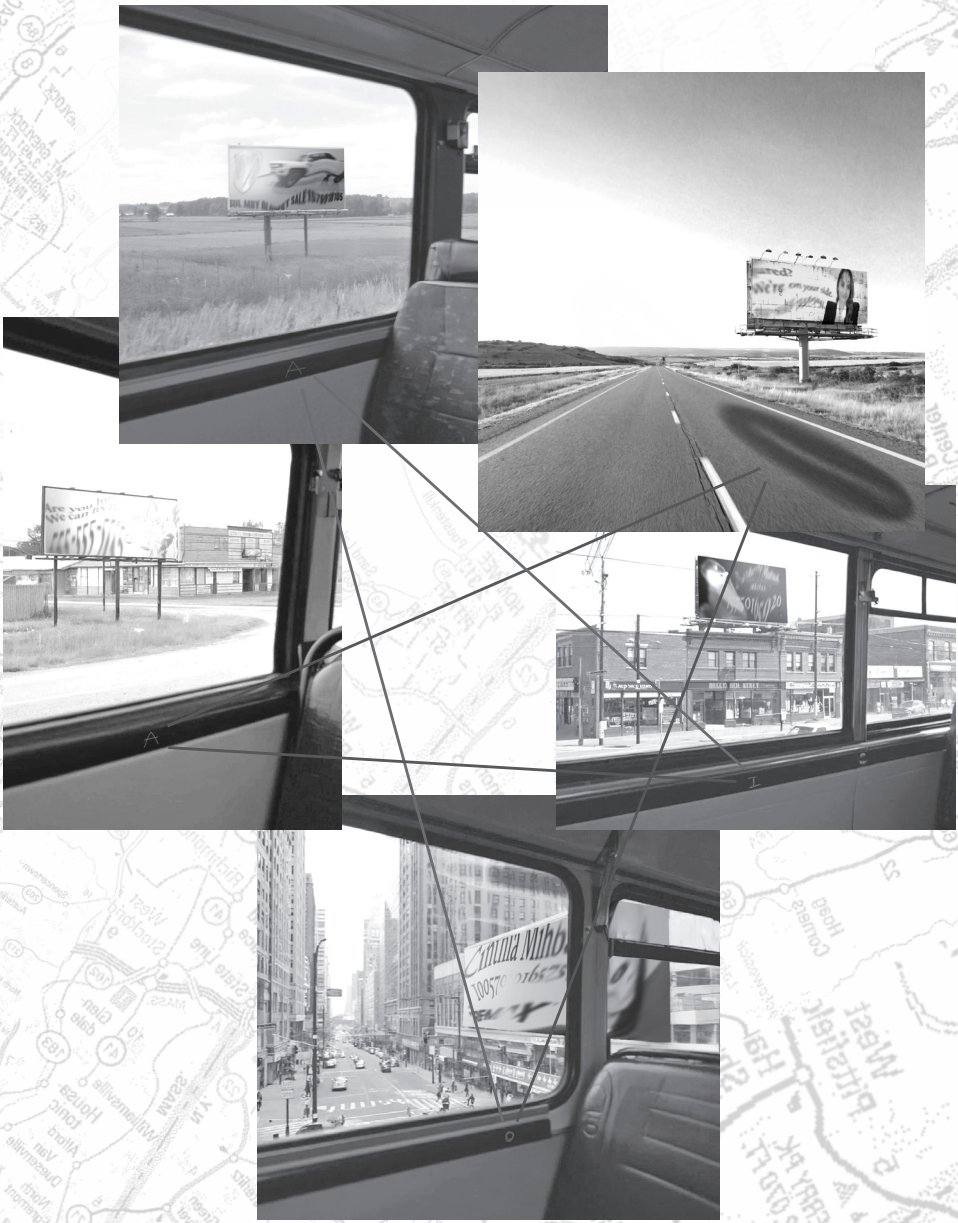
I got this weird voicemail before I left. The voice was really raspy, like they could barely breathe. All they said was "Connect the dots. Say It. Be silent. Repeat". I'm pretty sure it was one of them. I don't know why they won't stop fucking with me. Everything feels wrong - just take a look at these **photos** I attached. See what I mean?

I'm really scared. What do you think that message meant?

-R.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Maybe they were talking about a mantra? A sigil? There's probably a clue in the photos. Email us if you find anything.

We tried our best to figure it out—did we get it?



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR (CONT.)

We'd like to offer our sincerest apologies to those who reached out this summer looking for guidance from our staff advice columnist, 'Waxen' Wayne.

Shortly after receiving his quarterly stipend, Wayne stopped responding to our requests for his usual contribution.

We did, however, recently receive the below postcard, addressed to a nearby Chick-fil-A restaurant. We are unsure how it made it into our mailbox.

FOR A GROUP OF GODLESS, DRUG-ADDICTED COMMUNISTS, I AM SHOCKED THAT THE "STAFF" AT WAXEN EXPECTS ME TO WORK MORE THAN 3 DAYS IN A SINGEL YEAR. EVERY CAREFULLY-SELECTED WORD OF BRILLIANCE I OFFER YOU LOUTS COMPROMISES THE BRAND DEALS I'VE SECURED - YOU THWK 50 BUCKS AND A COPY OF YOUR RAG IS FAIR COMPENSATION? YOU THINK JETBLUE OR BLACKROCK FINANCIAL ARE GOING TO BE HAPPY TO SEE MY BYLWE ALONGSIDE THIS TRASH?

HERE, TAKE A SHOT AT OFFERWG THESE CRETINS ADVICE:

"I REFUSE TO TALK TO MY SPOUSE/FAMILY MEMBER/FRIEND ABOUT A MEANINGLESS ISSUE. OH WISE WAYNE, HOW CAN I SEARCH THE 'DEAR ABBY' ARCHIVES ON BING? – MOUTH BREATHER FROM MT. PLEASANT"

WAXEN is a quarterly, cooperative effort.

Our contributors are compensated for and retain all rights to their work.

No AI is used in its production.

Find us at **waxen.org** and **@readwaxen**.

Need advice? Send your darkest dilemmas to waxenwayne@gmail.com.

BEV AND BOB WOULD LIKE TO THANK WAXEN'S CONTRIBUTORS FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THEIR WONDROUS AND FRIGHTENING GIFTS WITH THE WORLD:

Johnny Cakes, a wandering animation of spirit and passion, bears responsibility for a gloriously grotesque portfolio of mixed media canvas art and photography. Find his work at **aroadkillproduction.org** and on Instagram at **@johnlabieniec**.

Omar El Badri, known artistically as **Axil Tinsti**, is an emerging Moroccan surrealist whose dense, unsettling penwork explores the space between chaos and imagination. Find more at **@axil.art** on Instagram.

Mike LePostollec (mikepost@yahoo.com) is a dog-lover, cinephile, and short story writer from Philadelphia. When he's not writing, Mike explores woodland trails with his loyal hound, Hugo. This is his first published story.

Returning to *Waxen*, Oregon's **Thomas Gray**'s charcoal-smeared nightmares can be found at **@tkgray9980** (Instagram) and **https://darkartmovement.com/artists/thomas-gray**.

Grown in the lush mountains of Central P.A., writer and exotic animal veterinarian **AM Sutter** has been fascinated with storytelling ever since she snuck downstairs as a child to watch *The Twilight Zone* with her father. Her works have appeared in multiple anthologies and fiction magazines.

Anthony Christopher is his mother's favorite Chicago artist. *Waxen* agrees; this is our second collab. Find more of his impeccably detailed work at **AnthonyChristopherart.com** and Instagram **(@anthonychristopherart)**.

Also from Chicago, award-winning knitter **Celia Winter's** speculative and romantic fiction has been published in *Baubles From Bones, Heartlines Spec, The Dark*, and several anthologies. Follow her newletter and find her socials at **celiawinter.kit.com**.

STK is a self-taught French surreal artist who works mostly in ink to illustrate concepts or situations that seem funny to her. Find more of the incredibly detailed products of her penmanship at **@stouwink** on Instagram.

W.A. Parkin hails from Sheffield, England and specialises in dark fiction. His most recent work appears on **scribbled.online**, with a short story collection forthcoming from his Limnisa residency in Greece. A film critic, festival juror, and theater director, he sounds quite busy.

Daniel Roop's speculative work received an Honorable Mention in Best Horror of the Year Vol. 17, and has been featured in publications including *Apex Magazine, Pseudopod*, and the previous two volumes of *Waxen*.

Minnesota's **Molly Thynes** has been a nanny, a purveyor of haunted artifacts, a mental health counselor, and, primarily, a writer. Her work has been published in *Tales from the Canyons of the Damned*, the *From the Yonder* anthology, *The Third Corona Book of Horror*, and many other collections.

WRONG WAY